

STUDIES IN THE LINGUISTIC FOUNDATIONS OF THOUGHT  
IN EARLY IRISH TRADITION

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## Abstract

The thesis investigates early Irish views on the concepts of thought and cognition through the lens of philosophy of language. It aims to establish how problems of linguistic expression relate to the understanding of mental activity in early Irish learned tradition (ca. 650–1100), particularly in such discourse-oriented disciplines as grammar and biblical exegesis. Irish contributions to this topic offer a unique perspective on the relationship between language and thought, not least due to the thriving bilingualism of Irish intellectual tradition. Therefore, this study brings together Latin and vernacular evidence and traces links between ideas expressed in both languages.

The study has a tripartite structure which moves from the views on the material aspects of language, towards Irish theories of meaning, and onwards to ideas that imagine thought itself as a special kind of language. The first part centres around Irish approaches to phonology, writing systems and criteria that define a word. It aims to explore the ways in which Irish grammarians considered the material aspects of language to establish basic mental mechanisms for the creation and processing of meaning. Part two surveys evidence for Irish theories of signification and investigates problems of the relationship between form, meaning and thought. The final part considers Irish language-philosophical theories which connect language and cognition, namely the techniques of non-literal exegesis and the concept of ‘mental speech’ – a metaphorical device which presents thought patterns in terms of language patterns.

Overall, the thesis offers the first comprehensive study of the intersection of philosophy of language and philosophy of mind in early Irish intellectual tradition.

## Abbreviations and Works Cited

- Adv. Math.* VIII = Sextus Empiricus, 'Against Logicians II', LCL 291, trans. Bury (1935: 240–489).
- Ad Cuimn.* = *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum*, CCSL 133D, ed. Bischoff and Löfstedt (1992).
- AH* = *Anecdota Helvetica*, GL 8, ed. Hagen, (1870).
- Aldhem, *Epist.* = *Aldehmi et ad Aldhelmum epistulae*, MGH AA 15, ed. Ehwald (1919: 473–503).
- Ambr. *Exameron* = Ambrose of Milan, *Exameron*, CSEL 32, ed. Schenkl (1896: 1–261)
- Ambros.* = *Ars Ambrosiana*, CCSL 133C, ed. Löfstedt (1982a).
- Ant. Iud.* = Flavius Josephus, 'Jewish Antiquities', LCL 242, trans. Thackeray (1930).
- Aug. Conf.* = Augustine, *Confessiones*, CCSL 27, ed. Verheijen (1981).
- Aug. De civ.* = Augustine, *De civitate dei*, CCSL 47–8 (ed. Dombart and Kalb 1955).
- Aug. De dial.* = Augustine, *De dialectica*, ed. and trans. Pinborg and Jackson (1975).
- Aug. De doct. christ.* = Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, CCSL 32, ed. Daur and Martin (1962).
- Aug. De Gen. ad litt.* = Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, CSEL 28, ed. Zycha (1894).
- Aug. De trin.* = Augustine, *De trinitate*, CCSL 50–50A, ed. Mountain and Glorie (1968).
- Auraic.* = *Auraicept na nÉces*, ed. and trans. Calder (1917).
- BW = *Das Bibelwerk* / 'The Irish Reference Bible', CCCM 173, ed. MacGinty (2000).
- Cassian, Conl.* = Cassian, *Conlationes*, CSEL 13, ed. Petschenig (1886).
- Cassiod. Inst.* = Cassiodorus, *Institutiones*, ed. Mynors (1961).
- CCSL* = *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*.
- CCSL 88A* = Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Expositio in Psalmos Iuliano Aeclanensi interprete*, ed. De Conick (1977).
- CCSM* = *Corpus Christianorum, Coninuatio Mediaevalis*.
- CDS* = *Cin Dromma Snechtai*.
- CIH* = *Corpus iuris Hibernici*, ed. Binchy (1978).
- Clem.* = Clemens Scottus, *Ars grammatica*, ed. Puckett (1978).
- CMCS* = *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*.
- Corm. Y* = *Sanas Cormaic*, ed. Meyer (1912).
- Crat.* = Plato, *Cratylus*, LCL 167, trans. Fowler (1926: 6–191).
- CSEL* = *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*.
- DMSS* = Augustinus Hibernicus, *De mirabilibus sacrae scripturae*, PL 35: 2149–200.



DO = Donatus Ortigraphus, *Ars grammatica*, CCCM 40D, ed. Chittenden (1982).

DOC = *Liber de ordine creaturarum*, ed. Díaz y Díaz (1972).

DOSL = *De origine scoticae linguae* ('O'Mulconry's Glossary'), CCCM Lexica Latina Medii Aevi 7, ed. and trans. Moran (2019).

eDIL = Electronic Dictionary of Irish Language.

*Etym.* = Isidore, *Etymologiae*, ed. Lindsay (1911).

Eucher. *Formulae* = Eucherius of Lérins, *Formulae spiritualis intelligentiae*, CSEL 31, ed. Wotke 1894: 1–62).

Faust. *De spiritu sancto* = Faustus of Riez, *De spiritu sancto*, CSEL 21, ed. Engelbrecht (1891: 99–157).

FF = *Forus Focal*, ed. Stokes (1894).

GCS = Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte.

GL = *Grammatici Latini*, ed. Keil et al. (1857–80).

Greg. *Hom. in Ezech.* = Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Hiezechihalem prophetam*, CCSL 142, ed. Adriaen (1971).

Greg. *Moralia* = Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob*, CCSL 143, 143A, 143B, ed. Adriaen (1979–85).

Greg. Naz. *Orationes* = Gregory of Nazanzen, *Orationes (interpretatio Rufini)*, CSEL 46, ed. Engelbrecht (1910).

GT = *Imbu macán cóic bliadnae* / 'Irish Gospel of Thomas', ed. and trans. Carney (1964: 90–105).

IB = *Immram Brain*, ed. and trans. Meyer (1895).

*Immacallam* = *Immacallam Choluim Chille 7 ind Óclaig oc Carraic Eolairg*, ed. and trans. Carey (2002).

Isid. *Chron.* = Isidore, *Chronica maiora*, MGH AA 11, ed. Mommsen (1894: 391–481).

Isid. *Diff.* = Isidore, *Differentiae*, PL 83: 9–98.

Isid. *Syn.* = Isidore, *Synonyma*, PL 83: 825–68.

Jerome, *Comm. in Esaiam* = Jerome, *Commentarii in Esaiam*, CCSL 73A, ed. Adriaen (1963).

Jerome, *Epist.* = Jerome, *Epistulae*, CSEL 54–6, ed. Hilberg (1910–18).

Lact. *De opificio dei* = Lactantius, *De opificio dei*, CSEL 27, ed. Brandt and Laubmann (1893: 1–64).

*Laur.* = *Ars Laureshamensis*, CCCM 40A, ed. Löfstedt (1977a).

LCL = Loeb Classical Library

LO = *In Lebor Ollaman*.

MGH AA = *Monumenta Germaniae Historica – Auctores Antiquissimi*.

- Ml. = Milan glosses, *Thes.* I: 7–483.  
 Mur. = Murethach, *In Donati artem maiorem*, CCCM 40, ed. Louis Holtz (1977b).  
 O'Dav. = 'O'Davoren's Glossary', ed. and trans. Stokes (1904a).  
 OIT = 'Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter', ed. and trans. Meyer (1894).  
 OITS = 'Old Irish Tract on Satire', ed. and trans. Meroney (1950).  
 Origen, *In Cant.* = Origen, *In Canticum canticorum (interpretatio Rufini)*, GCS 33, ed. Baehrens (1925).  
*Perih.* = Aristotle, 'On Interpretation', LCL 325, trans. Cooke and Tredennick (1938: 114–79).  
*PH* = Boethius, *Commentarii in librum Aristotelis Peri hermeneias*, ed. Meiser (1877–80).  
 Philo, *Migration of Abraham* = Philo of Alexandria, 'On the Migration of Abraham', LCL 261, trans. Colson and Whitaker (1932: 121–267).  
*PL* = *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Migne (1844–55).  
*PP* = Eriugena, *Periphyseon*; vol. 1–3: ed. and trans. Sheldon-Williams (1968–81); vol. 5: CCCM 165, ed. Jeauneau (2003).  
*QSQ* = *Quae sunt quae*, ed. Munzi (2004: 17–38).  
*SAM* = *Sex aetates mundi*, ed. and trans. Ó Cróinín (1983).  
*SE* = *Scéla na esérge*, ed. Best and Bergin (1929: 82–8).  
*Sed. In Galat.* = Sedulius Scottus, *In epistolam ad Galatas*, PL 103: 181–94.  
*Sed. In mai.* = Sedulius Scottus, *In Donati artem maiorem*, CCCM 40B, ed. Löfstedt (1977b).  
*Sed. In min.* = Sedulius Scottus, *In Donati artem minorem*, CCCM 40C, ed. Löfstedt (1977c: 3–54).  
*Serg.* = Sergilius, *Ars grammatici Sergilii*, ed. Marshall (2010).  
*Sg.* = St Gall glosses, *Thes.* II: 49–224.  
*SLH* = *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*  
*TB* = *In tenga bithnua*, ed. and trans. Carey (2009).  
*Thes.* = *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, ed. Stokes and Strachan (1901–3).  
*Vict. De def.* = Marius Victorinus, *Liber de definitionibus*, ed. Stangl (1888).  
*Virg. Epist.* = Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, *Epistolae*, ed. Löfstedt (2003: 1–102).  
*Virg. Epit.* = Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, *Epitomae*, ed. Löfstedt (2003: 103–245).  
*Wb.* = Würzburg glosses, *Thes.* I: 499–712.  
*ZCP* = *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*.

# Introduction

Whoever tries to grasp the proper framework of thought encounters only the categories of language (Bienveniste 1971: 63).

## *Prolegomena*

People have been striving for centuries to make sense of the omnipresent but elusive entity that is human mind. As is the case with most things, to understand how thought works, one has to think about it. This is a reasonable assumption but the circular logic on which it is based is rather unhelpful. Luckily, we humans have another supremely useful epistemological instrument at our disposal – language. Not only does it help us to start conversations about our ideas with others, but, due to the almost seamless conversion of thought into language, it inevitably provides a very tangible model for conceptualising very intangible mental processes. This is what Émile Bienveniste, one of the great scholars of the structuralist movement, expressed with such elegance. And though some might read it with a note of pessimism, it is the backbone of this study.

Our experience of language is so strong and so internalised that it affects how we perceive and comprehend other types of meaning production. In his *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine, one of the fathers of European language-philosophical tradition, observed that we understand non-linguistic signs through the lens of the most ubiquitous sign of all – the linguistic sign, i.e. the word:

*Signorum igitur, quibus inter se homines sua sensa communicant, quaedam pertinent ad oculorum sensum, pleraque ad aurium, paucissima ad ceteros sensus. [...] Et sunt haec omnia **quasi quaedam uerba uisibilia**. [...] Verba enim prorsus inter homines obtinuerunt principatum significandi quaecumque animo concipiuntur, si ea quisque prodere uelit (De doct. christ. II.iii.4; CCSL 32: 33.1–34.16).*

[Among the signs by means of which men express their meaning to one another, some pertain to the sense of sight, more to the sense of hearing, and very few to the other senses. [...] And all of those things are **like so many visible words**. [...] For words have come to be predominant among men for signifying whatever the mind conceives if they wish to communicate it to anyone (trans. Robertson 1958: 35–6)].<sup>1</sup>

Language thus provides a conceptual framework for understating the relationship between form and meaning in extralinguistic contexts. Moreover, it succeeds not

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<sup>1</sup> Highlighting of the key words and phrases in bold is mine here and throughout.

only in lending a logical structure to the external world, but also, given its direct access to ‘whatever the mind conceives’, to the world within: language can, in some ways, open a window into the realm of thought.

These considerations are not unique to specific thinkers or time periods; they naturally emerge in different intellectual traditions throughout history whenever people attempt to describe the work of the mind. In this study, I propose to examine one such tradition – that of early medieval Ireland in the centuries between ca. 650 – ca. 1100. There are abundant reasons for choosing it as the object for studying views on the relationship between language and thought. Indisputably, Irish scholars of the early middle ages created one of the richest intellectual legacies among other European traditions of the time. This legacy, moreover, is thoroughly bilingual, unapologetically combining high-class Latin learning with a flourishing culture of vernacular scholarship. This fact undoubtedly played a major role in the interest of Irish intellectuals in the functioning of language. Between the seventh and the ninth century Irish scholars were practically unrivalled when it came to grammar and exegesis – two major disciplines of the medieval curriculum concerned with the problems of language, meaning and interpretation. This vast potential for exploring Irish language-philosophical evidence is surprisingly juxtaposed with a scarcity of existing research on this subject matter. And this is where the present study enters the stage.

### ***Research Design***

The work explores early Irish approaches to the concept of thought through the lens of philosophy of language. Its main goal is to investigate the ways in which Irish scholars understood linguistic structures to be representative of cognitive structures. The starting point for such a study is to examine the two main components of language: form and meaning. This dichotomy will provide a logical structure to the first two parts of this work.

Thus, the first task of this study is to examine medieval Irish approaches to formal aspects of language and to what extent they were understood to have a conceptual basis. It will be shown that linguistic objects that have a tangible physical form (e.g. speech sound, letter, word-as-form) could, in the view of Irish grammarians, be simultaneously understood as mental entities.

The next step is to consider early Irish theories of meaning and their implications for the question of the relationship between thought and language. Without a doubt, meaning is the central concept for this study. It is the agent that binds together the realms of cognition and linguistic expression. We will encounter it at many points throughout the work, appearing now as primary signification, the link between a word and a thing, now as infinitely abstracted meaning extracted by means of interpretation. It is the versatility of meaning as a concept that allows it to adapt to the demands of different cognitive tasks and emerge as a linguistics representation of mental activity. It can be evaluated using a variety of criteria and mapped onto several different scales: from corporeal to incorporeal, from objective to subjective, from lexical to discursive. All these various poles will be addressed, in one way or another, throughout the work, focusing on the ways in which meaning was viewed as a product and/or object of cognition.

After completing the analysis of Irish approaches to the problems of linguistic form and meaning and their links to cognitive phenomena, it is necessary to ask the final question, namely whether thought itself could have been viewed as a type of language. Here, the findings of the first two steps can be further expanded upon by considering Irish accounts of supralinguistic forms of communication and whether they contain explicit or implicit comparisons with linguistic structures.

A few remarks regarding the limitations of the study need to be specified. I should emphasise that the work is not aiming to establish a universal, overarching and consistent theory of language for the entire range of sources considered. As will become clear from the discussion, there existed a multiplicity of approaches and theoretical positions, with different authors choosing to highlight different nuances within the broader theme of thought and language. These views may not always perfectly align, especially considering the rather broad timeframe of the study. The sources range from ca. 650 to ca. 1100, thus covering the Old and Middle Irish period. It should be noted, however, that the majority of texts belong to the period before ca. 900. A handful of later works is included on account of the additional detail and theoretical innovation that they bring to the discussion.

### ***Structure***

The work is comprised of seven chapters which are divided into three parts. The argument progresses in an ascending logic, from external and corporeal aspects of

language to internal and incorporeal ones. **Part I** consists of three chapters and focuses on the material aspects of language in their potential to bear meaning. **Chapter 1** is concerned with the concept of speech sound as both a corporeal phenomenon and a conceptual entity. **Chapter 2** moves from spoken to written language and centres around letter as the smallest linguistic unit which, despite lacking the full semantic power of a word, has the capacity to act as a graphic symbol pointing towards higher meaning. **Chapter 3** explores Irish approaches to word and ‘wordhood’ and how they balance considerations of form and meaning. **Part II** is dedicated entirely to the concepts of meaning and signification. It comprises two chapters. **Chapter 4** examines Irish views of meaning in relation to form, particularly in etymological discourse, while **Chapter 5** considers approaches to meaning as an incorporeal entity, either objective and existing outside the mind or internal, as a product of the intellect. In **Part III**, the realms of language and thought finally converge, and their intersection is explored in two chapters. **Chapter 6** deals with Irish theories of exegesis and particularly with approaches to non-literal types of interpretation where meaning, no longer tied to a specific reference, can be almost infinitely modified by the reader. Finally, **Chapter 7** offers an investigation of the concept of mental language, that is, a type of intellectual communication based on pure, unmediated transfer of meaning between minds. Altogether, the study offers the first comprehensive exploration of the intersection of philosophy of language and philosophy of mind in early Irish intellectual tradition.

### ***Sources***

Thematically, the present study belongs to the field of philosophy of language and, to a lesser degree, philosophy of mind. Some questions can be raised regarding the very definition of philosophy and its existence in the early middle ages outside of the very highest rank of intellectuals at the Carolingian court, those of the stature of Alcuin, Sedulius Scottus and John Scottus Eriugena. Such a sceptical position is taken, for example, by John Marenbon (1981: 2–4). However, the recent work by Daniel Watson (2018) has greatly expanded the boundaries of what can be categorised as philosophy in pre-scholastic period to include ontological principles articulated in texts and genres which are not traditionally associated with philosophical discourse, such as grammar, law, poetry and narrative literature. Following Watson’s lead, I consider a wide range of ideas, statements and assumptions about the nature of linguistic communication, the mechanisms of its

functioning on various levels, from physiological to cognitive, as pertaining to language-philosophical discourse.

With bilingualism being a crucial characteristic of the Irish learned tradition, it is necessary to consider Latin and vernacular sources in conjunction and to carefully observe the connections between them. In this study, I aim to bring together evidence in both languages and to trace the similarities in the language-philosophical theories that they expound. Doing so also requires a greater integration of sources produced within Ireland and outside of it, in the many thriving centres of Irish influence on the continent.

In this section, I offer a concise overview of the range of sources that appear in this study. I will not provide extensive details on the background of the texts here as this information is usually given as each work is first introduced in the discussion.

All sources that figure in the study can be roughly divided into five thematic categories: grammar, exegesis, glossarial discourse, texts about poetry and narrative literature. The first two groups are by far the most substantial and the most significant for this study, with the other three providing supporting evidence or introducing additional perspectives.

The first category comprises grammatical works. It includes a wide selection of Hiberno-Latin treatises as Irish grammatical tradition truly flourished between the seventh and ninth century. At the earliest margin of our timeframe, in the second half of the seventh century, are located the works of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus (ed. Löfstedt 2003) and his follower Sergilius (ed. Marshall 2010) as well as an anonymous poem on the alphabet known as *Versus cuiusdam Scotti de alphabeto* (ed. and trans. Howlett 2010). At the turn of the eighth century (ca. 700), we find the anonymous *Quae sunt quae* (ed. Munzi 2004) and *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum* (ed. Bischoff and Löfstedt 1992). The same dating has been proposed for *Ars Ambrosiana* which may not itself be an Irish composition but relies heavily on a Hiberno-Latin source (ed. Löfstedt 1982a; cf. pp. 130–1). The production of grammatical texts picks up pace at the beginning of the ninth century with the discovery of Priscian's *Ars grammatica* and the newly found interest in applying logical categories to grammar. Among the first crop of these works are the anonymous *Ars Bernensis* dated to ca. 800 (ed. Hagen 1870) and two treatises now titled *Ars grammatica*, one attributed to Clemens Scottus (ed. Puckett 1978) and another to an author known as Donatus

Ortigraphus (ed. Chittenden 1982), both written in the first decades of the ninth century in Carolingian Francia. A few decades later, around the middle of the ninth century, a group of interrelated commentaries on Donatus' *Ars maior* emerges, written by Muretach (ed. Holtz 1977b), Sedulius Scottus (ed. Löfstedt 1977b) and the anonymous author of *Ars Laureshamensis* (ed. Löfstedt 1977a). Sedulius is also the author of a commentary on Donatus' other work – *Ars minor* (ed. Löfstedt 1977c). Closing the list of Hiberno-Latin grammatical works is John Scotus Eriugena's fragmentary commentary on Priscian likely written in the second half of the ninth century (ed. Luhtala 2000a, 2000b).

Vernacular sources in this category are significantly less numerous. The only full-scale grammatical work in Irish is *Auraicept na nÉces* whose dating is notoriously problematic (ed. and trans. Calder 1917). Its original core may stem from as early as the seventh century and it has been edited separately by Anders Ahlqvist (ed. and trans. Ahlqvist 1983). The text then became an object of study in itself and continued to accrue commentary until the late medieval period (cf. n. 43). Another text that figures prominently in this study is *Dlíged sésa a huraicept na mac sésa* 'Order of Higher Knowledge from the Primer for the Students of Higher Knowledge' composed ca. 700 (ed. Gwynn 1942: 35–40; ed. and trans. Corthals 2007; cf. *CIH* III 1126.33–1129.32). *Dlíged sésa* is not strictly a grammatical work but it does deal with grammatical categories such as speech sound and word. Naturally, the list of vernacular grammatical texts cannot be complete without the St Gall glosses on Priscian (*Thes.* II: 49–224; Hofman 1996; Bauer, Hofman and Moran 2017). The dating of the corpus is complicated as multiple levels of glossing can be distinguished. A rough date ca. 850 can be suggested based on the dating of the manuscript which contains them (cf. n. 31).

An important category of grammatical sources that appear in Chapter 2 are anonymous Latin treatises some of which are still unedited and all of which are little-studied. Of particular significance are two groups of interrelated tracts on the letters of the alphabet. One of these groups, consisting, to my knowledge, of seven texts contains variations of a narrative which outlines the history of the invention of different alphabets. The distinctive feature of the second group, comprising five texts, is its approach to interpreting letters exegetically whereby the graphic shape of a letter and the number of pen strokes of which it composed are understood as exegetical symbols. While there is no conclusive evidence that would show that



these texts originate from Irish tradition, I make a case that they all bear a certain influence of Irish grammatical discourse. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the ideas found in them were familiar to Irish scholars, if not pioneered by them. The discussion of these treatises is a valuable asset of this study as they are rarely considered as a cohesive group. Some of them have been studied individually by such scholars as Bernhard Bischoff (1973) and Luigi Munzi (2007) who also pinpointed their links to Irish tradition. However, my investigation of them here centres their intertextuality and direct parallels with Hiberno-Latin evidence. A deeper examination of these two groups of texts was made possible through a short-term research grant awarded to me by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in Spring 2022 (cf. n. 50).

The second group of sources equally as substantial as the grammatical works is exegetical discourse. Within it, an extensive sub-group can be recognised, namely texts dedicated to the study of the Psalter. The earliest of such texts used in this study is the early-eighth-century gloss-commentary known as *Glossa in psalmos*, titled so by its editor, Martin McNamara (1986). It is written primarily in Latin and appears to be of mixed Irish and Northumbrian provenance. The peak of Irish exegetes' interest in the Psalter falls on the first half of the ninth century when two key vernacular works emerged: the 'Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter' (ed. Meyer 1894) and the Milan glosses (*Thes.* I: 7–483; Griffith and Stifter 2007–13). The glosses, however, do not comment on the Psalter directly but rather on the Latin translation of the psalm-commentary by Theodore of Mopsuestia. To this period also belongs the monumental Hiberno-Latin *Bibelwerk* or 'The Irish Reference Bible' – a *bona fide* exegetical odyssey through the entire biblical canon which contains, among many other things, an exegetical introduction to the Psalter which is related to the 'Old Irish Treatise'.<sup>2</sup> The tradition of Psalter study continues into the Middle Irish period with glossed Psalters such as the Southampton Psalter from ca. 1000 (ed. Ó Néill 2012) and the fragmentary Psalter of St Caimín dating from ca. 1100, i.e. the upper chronological limit of this study (*Thes.* I: 6).

As for the commentaries on the books of the New Testament, special mention should be made of the last of the three major Old Irish gloss corpora – the Würzburg glosses

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<sup>2</sup> A full edition of the *Bibelwerk* has not yet been attempted. However, an edition of the commentary on the Pentateuch was published by Gerard MacGinty (2000) and the introduction to the Psalter has been edited by Martin McNamara (1973: 291–8).

on the Pauline epistles (*Thes.* I: 499–712). The Würzburg corpus is also the earliest of the three, dating roughly to the mid-eighth century.<sup>3</sup> Two other texts in this category, though they are not as prominent in the study are the Hiberno-Latin commentary on the Gospel of Luke found in an early-ninth century manuscript now in Vienna (ed. Kelly 1974) and Sedulius Scottus' commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians (*PL* 103: 181–94). The significance of these two works here lies in their exposition of multi-level exegetical models.

A fairly well represented exegetical genre in this study is homiletics. The most problematic source in this category as regards its date is the so-called *Catechesis Celtica*, a Hiberno-Latin collection of commentaries and homilies primarily based on Gospel narratives (ed. Wilmart 1933). Due to its composite nature, it can only roughly be assigned to the period before 900 AD. Chapter 6 contains a detailed examination of a text which has previously been all but neglected, despite the fact that it is contained in the Book of Armagh – a manuscript which does not lack scholarly attention due to its connection to the Patrician tradition. The text in question can be described as a collection of notes for a Pentecostal homily and likely dates from ca. 800, as does the Book of Armagh itself (*Thes.* I: 495–6). Another homily on the Pentecost appears in the *Leabhar Breac*, recorded both in Latin and in Middle Irish (ed. Atkinson 1887). Despite its later date – the homilies in the *Leabhar Breac* are thought to have been written around the middle of the eleventh century – it shares some parallels with the text in the Book of Armagh. Roughly contemporary with the *Leabhar Breac* homily is the Middle Irish sermon on universal resurrection *Scéla na esérgi* which can be dated to the second half of the eleventh century (ed. and trans. Stokes 1904b; ed. Best and Bergin 1929).

Two cosmological texts make an appearance in the study. One of them is *Liber de ordine creaturarum* which dates from the second half of the seventh century and offers a comprehensive view of the universe as it was created by God (*PL* 83: 913–54; ed. Díaz y Díaz 1972; trans. Smyth 2011). The second text likewise presents an impressive panorama of the world from the moment of Creation, but written in the

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<sup>3</sup> A digital edition of the Würzburg glosses has been prepared by Adrian Doyle (2018). However, it is not searchable in the same way as the digital editions of the Milan and St Gall glosses which is why the Würzburg corpus is usually omitted from the occasional analyses of the frequency of certain terms.

vernacular. It is *In tenga bithnua* 'The Ever-New Tongue', originally composed in the ninth century and revised in the tenth (ed. and trans. Stokes 1905; Carey 2009).

*In tenga bithnua* partially crosses over into the genre of apocryphal literature as its cosmological account is presented as a revelation from the apostle Philip. Another work that can be classified as an apocryphon is the epic Middle Irish (ca. 1000) composition *Saltair na Rann* 'Psalter of Verses' which retells the events of the entire biblical narrative in poetic form (ed. Stokes 1883; ed. and trans. Greene and Kelly 1976; Greene 2007).

One text which, like its author, stands out among other early medieval intellectual productions is Eriugena's *Periphyseon* or *De divisione naturae* (ed. and trans. Sheldon-Williams 1968–81; ed. Jeanaeu 2003). As its title suggests, it purports to discover a rational ontological order in the whole of created nature by means of a rigorous philosophical investigation through the lens of Christian Neoplatonism.

This completes the digest of the two key groups of sources – grammatical and exegetical. Now mention should also be made of a few minor categories. First, much important language-philosophical evidence can be derived from early Irish glossaries which perfected the medieval art of etymology. Here, two works should be listed that feature prominently in this study: *De origine scoticae linguae* (*DOSL*) also known as 'O'Mulconry's Glossary' (ed. and trans Moran 2019) and 'O'Davoren's Glossary' (ed. and trans. Stokes 1904a; cf. *CIH* IV 1466–1531).<sup>4</sup> While, as with glosses, the dating of the glossaries can be problematic due to their layered nature, it is certain that *De origine scoticae linguae* and 'O'Davoren's Glossary' began to be compiled in the seventh century. The two glossaries are rather different in nature. 'O'Davoren's Glossary' primarily specialises in legal material while *DOSL* is broader in scope.

Another small category of sources is comprised of texts relating to the poetic profession, which held a privileged status in early Irish culture. *Dliged sésa* which was listed among the grammatical texts above fits into this category as it provides instruction to aspiring poets. Another early, eighth-century text which explores the cognitive mechanisms that determine a person's capacity for poetry is known as 'The Caldron of Poesy' (ed. and trans. Breatnach 1981). Apart from their obvious

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<sup>4</sup> An online database for early Irish glossaries has also been made available by Russell, Arbuthnot and Moran (2006).

poetic focus, the two texts also share connections to Irish legal tradition, specifically to the ‘poetico-legal’ school of *Bretha Nemed*. The same can be said of two other texts in this category which deal specifically with the genre of satire – the ninth-century ‘Old Irish Tract on Satire’ and the ‘*Trefócal* Tract’ composed in the late-ninth – early-tenth century.

The poetic theme continues in a group of vernacular texts which figure in Chapter 6 as a case-study of the uses of the hermeneutic paradigm in narrative literature. For this purpose, two small groups of texts related to Mongán mac Fíachnai and Finn mac Cumail are used. Among the tales featuring Mongán, three are discussed in this study: *Immacallam Choluim Chille 7 ind óclaig oc Carraic Eolairg* ‘The Colloquy of Colum Cille and the Youth at Carn Eolairg’ (ed. and trans. Carey 2002), *Scél asamberar combad hé Find mac Cumail Mongán* ‘A story from which it is inferred that Mongán was Find mac Cumail’ (ed. and trans. White 2006: 73–4, 79–81) and *Immram Brain* ‘The Voyage of Bran’ (ed. and trans. Meyer 1895; Mac Mathúna 1985), all belonging to the eighth-century canon of *Cin Dromma Snechtai*. The Fenian tradition is likewise represented by early, eighth-century narratives: ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’ (ed. and trans. Meyer 1904), *Tucait fagbála in fessa do Fínn 7 marbad Cúlduib* ‘How Finn Obtained Knowledge and the Slaying of Cúldub’ (ed. and trans. Hull 1941) and *Scéla Mošauluim 7 Maic Con 7 Luigdech* ‘The Story of Mošaulum and Mac Con and Lugaid’ (ed. and trans. Meyer 1910: 28–41). The choice of these texts is determined by the prominence of poetic motifs in them and the emphasis on the deeper intellectual insight that poetic training brings.

It would be impossible to evaluate Irish evidence without placing it within the wider lineage of European thought. Throughout the discussion, I make frequent recourse to the ideas developed by late antique grammarians, exegetes and philosophers which had a profound impact on medieval tradition and were likely known, directly or indirectly, to Irish scholiasts. Among the grammarians, two chief influences on medieval tradition are Donatus, with his two companion works *Ars minor* and *Ars maior*, and Priscian whose *Ars grammatica* became a pillar of medieval grammar starting from the late-eighth century. Perhaps the single most important figure for this study is Augustine, whose theories of sign, signification and inner speech are the cornerstone of Christian philosophy of language. The works that will be (and already have been) cited in relation to these topics are *De dialectica*, *De trinitate*, *De doctrina christiana*, *De civitate dei* and *Confessiones*. Another name that recurs

multiple times throughout the work is Gregory the Great who left many important remarks regarding the interface between language and thought, especially in prophetic discourse and heavenly communication, in his *Homiliae in Ezechielem* and *Moralia in Iob*.

Among other Christian authorities whose ideas contribute to the discussion of topics at hand are Jerome, John Cassian, Isidore of Seville, Ambrose of Milan, Origen of Alexandria, Lactantius, Faustus of Riez, Theodore of Mopsuestia. One author who does not explicitly fit into this group of ecclesiastical writers is Boethius. While his faith may be a subject for discussion, what is not in doubt is the immense role that he played in transmitting Greek and Hellenistic philosophy to the Latin West. His commentaries on Aristotle are of crucial importance when it comes to theory of meaning, even though their use comes with reservations about the knowledge of Boethius in early medieval Ireland (cf. nn. 217, 220).

And indeed, two other names that always loom large in European intellectual tradition are Plato and Aristotle. I frequently turn to their language-philosophical legacies as a starting point for many later developments. Although there is no substantial evidence that such works as Plato's *Cratylus* or Aristotle's *Peri hermeneias* were known in Ireland, or in Western Europe, at the time, their names were certainly revered, and their ideas became so ingrained in Western philosophy of language that they were often transmitted unwittingly, through a sort of cultural osmosis, not least through the works of the abovementioned grammarians, exegetes and philosophers.

### ***Methodology and Conceptual Framework(s)***

This study is positioned as a work of intellectual history and its main method of approaching primary sources is through close reading, which relies on careful and sustained interpretation of written evidence. Given the wide range of primary material that to be examined, it is necessary to address a few specific concerns that pertain to the textual corpus as a whole and to its individual parts.

The corpus of primary sources introduced in the previous section roughly comprises four parts: grammatical texts, exegetical texts, texts concerning poetry and narrative texts. It has also been emphasised that this study strives to balance the analysis of vernacular and Latin evidence. This is done for three main reasons. First, the breadth of the corpus helps to ensure that the study accounts for a multiplicity of

voices and approaches. While it would be impossible to examine all relevant sources in their totality, this work aims to present the most comprehensive survey of early Irish language-philosophical ideas to-date. Second, the variety of genres that are represented in the corpus is necessitated by the fact that ideas about language and its connection to the mind are diffused across different parts of the Irish intellectual tradition. While grammar is the discipline that provides the most direct insights into Irish theories of language, important aspects of those theories are also encoded in works of other genres. So, for example, exegetical texts often contain meta-theoretical considerations regarding the hermeneutical method that underlies any type of textual interpretation. A distinctive feature of the Irish learned tradition is the role of poets and poetry within it, delineated by a complex set of rules preserved in a number of texts of poetico-legal orientation. Reflexes of this tradition are also embedded in multiple vernacular narrative texts. Indeed, poetic discourse has a direct and practical interest in the functioning of language and may thus complement or modify language-philosophical ideas contained in grammatical texts. Third, the sustained juxtaposition of Latin and vernacular material is integral to building a comprehensive dossier of any intellectual phenomenon within a bilingual tradition such as that of the early Irish *literati*. There is no doubt that both Irish and Latin learning had profound influence on each other. It is therefore necessary to consider them side by side in order to observe their commonalities and be mindful of their differences.

Another methodological concern that arises from the nature of the textual corpus is whether sources of different types require different interpretative strategies. The majority of texts used in this study are works of continuous, non-narrative prose. Grammatical texts of this nature can be further divided into grammatical commentaries (e.g. on Donatus or Priscian, such as those by Murethach and Sedulius Scottus), grammatical dialogues between a teacher and a pupil (e.g. those by Clemens Scottus and Donatus Ortigraphus) and grammatical manuals that do not depend on a pre-existing text for their structure (such as *Auraicept na nÉces*, although its canonical core became the subject of its own ever-evolving commentary). Exegetical texts are likewise represented by commentaries (e.g. on the Psalter, on the Gospels etc.) as well as by extensive homiletic literature. These types of texts offer sustained interpretations of certain intellectual matters espoused by their authors. However, close attention should be paid to the possible

sources and, in the case of commentaries, to the text being commented on in order to estimate how much our authors engage with the material at their disposal.

This last principle gains further relevance when dealing with glosses – a source type which features prominently in this study (viz. the Würzburg, Milan and St Gall corpora). This is a distinct type of primary sources that does not stand on its own and always has to be considered in conjunction with the text to which they belong, more so than continuous commentary. Functioning as explicative remarks accompanying difficult words and passages in a text, glosses highlight the specific concerns and areas of inquiry that interested early medieval readers. Understanding the content of glosses requires careful consideration of their context, which is why examples from the glosses used in this study are always accompanied by citations from the passages on which they comment. Another difficulty associated with glosses is their layered nature. This is especially a concern for the Milan and St Gall corpora which appear to have been copied from multiple sources and may therefore originate from significantly different time periods.<sup>5</sup> This problem cannot be easily circumvented and it would be somewhat counterproductive to attempt to establish a dating for the specific glosses that are discussed in this thesis. In this situation, the broad timeframe of this study is of some benefit as it allows us to consider developments in Irish language-philosophical thought in broad strokes. Moreover, it seems reasonable for the present purposes to take the glosses to be approximately contemporary with their manuscripts, since the manuscripts are direct evidence of the fact that the ideas expressed in the glosses were considered relevant and useful to whoever copied them at that specific period of time.

One more type of sources may be briefly discussed that requires additional interpretative considerations, namely the group of texts that has been loosely designated as ‘poetico-legal’ and connected to the school of *Bretha Nemed* (viz. *Dliged sésa*, ‘Caldron of Poesy’, ‘Old Irish Treatise on Satire’, ‘*Trefocal* Tract’). These texts focus on codifying norms and requirements of poetic composition that are rooted in the vernacular poetic tradition and are not as transparently linked to

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<sup>5</sup> The Milan glosses are copied by two scribes, presumably from more than one manuscript (Best 1936: 34; Blom 2017: 93–4). In the St Gall corpus, at least three glossators can be distinguished. The age of the glosses themselves is debated, with some linguistic forms suggesting a date in the seventh century and others appearing contemporary with the manuscript (mid-ninth century) or later (Strachan 1903; Hofman 1996: vol. 1, 43–6; Lambert 1996; Roost 2013). The Würzburg glosses seem to have been an effort of a single author and were mostly copied by a single scribe, with a few additions in a different hand (Ó Néill 2001).

wider European developments as the fields of grammar and exegesis. When working with these sources, it is important to view them as a product of an environment where the form and function of poetry were rigidly determined and where poetic language had the (perceived) power to alter reality. However, at the same time it is important to show that this tradition was not isolated from mainstream thought in other discourse-oriented disciplines, especially in grammar. This is why in this study I attempt to put this evidence on equal footing with Latin and Latinate material despite its relatively obscure ways of expression and seemingly unconventional approach to language-theoretical problems.

As was demonstrated in the previous section, the primary sources used in this study are texts produced by Irish scholars working in Ireland or on the continent, in Carolingian intellectual centres. It should be noted, however, that anonymous Hiberno-Latin evidence may cause certain difficulties of attribution.<sup>6</sup> While the majority of Latin texts in the corpus have been securely identified as products of Irish tradition (e.g. *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum*, *Quae sunt quae*, *Bibelwerk*, *Catechesis Celtica*, *Liber de ordine creaturarum* etc.), the origin of others has been debated or not sufficiently discussed. Among the former are the works of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus and his supposed pupil Sergilius. Here, I have accepted the compelling arguments for their Irish background advanced by Herren (1979; 1992; 1994; 1995), Ó Cróinín (1989) and Bracken (2002) for Virgilius and by Marshall (2010) and Munzi (2013–14) for Sergilius. One group of texts which has not been definitively attached to Irish tradition is the collection of anonymous treatises on letters. As mentioned previously, these texts display multiple connections to Irish grammatical learning, some of which have been observed by previous scholars and are further discussed in Chapter 2. It is beyond the scope of this study to provide a definitive argument for their Hiberno-Latin background and I intend to return to this topic in future research. For the purposes of this study, this textual group is

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<sup>6</sup> A set of criteria for identifying Hiberno-Latin texts was proposed Bernhard Bischoff's influential *Wendepunkte in der Geschichte der lateinischen Exegese im Frühmittelalter* 'Turning Points in the History of Latin Exegesis in the Early Middle Ages' (1954). The article subsequently received reasonable criticism from Clare Stancliffe (1975) and somewhat less so by Michael Gorman (1996). Gorman's 'cavalier' dismissal of Bischoff's theory was itself heavily criticised and dismantled by Michael Herren (1998), Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (2000), Charles Wright (2000) and, most recently, by John Contreni (2022). Bischoff's 'symptoms', though they should be carefully evaluated on individual basis, are still widely accepted today. While Bischoff focused on exegetical texts, a similar list of Irish 'symptoms' for grammatical sources was compiled by Bengt Löfstedt (1965) and subsequently revisited by Vivien Law (1982 [1997: 28–49]).



included on a conditional basis as displaying Irish influence rather than as verifiably Irish. Therefore, comparisons to Irish material are presented as suggestive of further links to Hiberno-Irish tradition but are not postulated as being of demonstrably Irish origin.

Once again, it is evident that the textual corpus for this study is rather extensive. One may therefore wonder to what extent it is possible to draw generalisations from a range of texts of varying date, place, genre and authorship. In this respect, I would like to point out that establishing and tracing precise transmission routes of certain ideas is not among the aims of this study. Therefore, I do not insist on genetic connections between all cases of similar thinking discovered in this work, unless it can be definitively demonstrated. It seems more significant that particular ideas and paradigms re-emerge at different times and in different places, articulated by different people. That these ideas remained pertinent across a number of texts of varying origins is a testament to their heuristic value, whether they were inherited or independently reinvented. Besides, this study is the first attempt at a broader scope for the topic of early Irish philosophy of language. It purports to offer a general framework which can be further refined with dedicated studies of individual source types.

Lastly, I would like to discuss the approach that I have taken throughout the thesis to frame the discussion of medieval material at hand in parallel to certain modern theoretical developments, largely pertaining to the areas of linguistics and philosophy of language. For example, Chapter 1, which deals with the notion of speech sound, opens with a (necessarily brief) glance at modern approaches to phonology and how phonological units are understood to be conceptual rather than physical entities. This stance is prominent in the field of cognitive linguistics but it can be traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure's immensely influential theory of linguistic sign which, in fact, reoccurs at several points throughout this study. It is the ultimate reference point for considering the problems of semantics and the interaction between form and meaning. Other examples of modern theoretical frameworks that I use as distant comparanda are Gottlob Frege's influential theory of the distinction between sense, reference and idea as a helpful means to differentiate between different categories of meaning in Chapter 5; theories of mental language in Chapter 7 (here, the work of Jerry Fodor qualifies as a modern framework but William Ockham is, of course, not a modern thinker – rather he is

more 'modern' relative to the early medieval material); and postmodernist approaches to language in Chapters 2 and 6. Among the latter, I specifically refer to Jacques Derrida's views on writing as the main locus of linguistic signification in the context of my discussion of early medieval ideas on the symbolic power of *littera* and Roland Barthes' famous thesis of the 'death of the author' as a mirror to medieval approaches to biblical hermeneutics and its focus on the interpreter as the creator of meaning. I should also point out that the postmodern comparisons were, in part, inspired by David Olson's thought-provoking study 'The World on Paper: The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading' (Olson 1994) where he proposed that the invention of writing produced a shift from thinking about things to thinking about words and turned language into an object of conscious reflection and analysis. The work offers an instructive overview of the history of linguistic consciousness drawing on evidence from a variety of disciplines, such as philosophy of language, sociology and anthropology.

I would hereby like to emphasise that these intellectual paradigms are not used as practical methodologies in this study and neither is their purpose to provide direct comparison to medieval material. Doing so would be anachronistic and, while applying modern methodologies to historical sources is not only possible but often beneficial, the various frameworks listed above would be difficult to reconcile and balance within the scope of one study. Instead, in offering these modern-day paradigmatic analogies to the ideas found in medieval Irish texts, I aim to achieve three things: (1) to demonstrate that present-day developments do not present such a radical break from pre-modern thought as is sometimes assumed and that, even if there are no traceable connections between them, innovative ideas can emerge in any historical period; (2) to highlight the diversity of approaches and intellectual pluralism that existed in medieval thought in the same way as they exist now; and (3), on a more stylistic note, to foreshadow the direction of the argument in a given chapter.

### ***Previous Research***

Irish grammatical tradition, both vernacular and Hiberno-Latin, boasts a robust history of scholarship. Irish exegesis likewise often captures scholarly attention, as does the vernacular poetic learning. Recounting all that has been written about these genres would be unfeasible, which is why this section will focus on select

works whose scope overlaps with the aims of the present study. This historiographical sketch will start with a few studies that focus on *grammatica* as a discipline that lays the ground rules for intellectual engagement with language and linguistic theory. I will then review relevant scholarship on the individual concepts and themes that are examined in each part of the thesis: speech sound, letter, word, meaning (which also leads to problems of etymology and hermeneutics). I will also outline the state of the question in regard to supra- and quasi-linguistic forms of communication and the language of thought. This will help situate the current work within existing scholarship and elucidate its original contribution.

The book that in many ways inspired my approach to the questions of medieval linguistic thought is Martin Irvine's 'The Making of Textual Culture: *Grammatica* and Literary Theory, 350–1100' (1994). Irvine masterfully weaves together classical and medieval philosophical concepts, linguistic categories and techniques of literary theory to create a comprehensive view of grammar as a practice that does not merely codify but creates knowledge about language and text. He also elucidates the intrinsic connection between grammar and hermeneutics, with their joint interest in the mechanisms of signification. The impact of Irvine's overall stance on the subject of *grammatica* is recognisable throughout this study.

Another key figure for the study of medieval *grammatica* as a syncretic discipline that regulates interaction between author, text and reader is Vivien Law. She explored philosophical structures that underlie practical grammatical knowledge in a sprawling overview of the history of linguistic ideas from the classical to the early modern period (Law 2003), as well as with a more precise focus on Carolingian grammar, paying equal attention to continental and Insular developments (Law 1997).

As for Irish material, *Auraicept na nÉces* often becomes the driving force for studies on *grammatica*, due to its comprehensiveness and unique status as the earliest vernacular grammar. Several important contributions focus on the *Auraicept* as the defining document of Irish textual culture and the model for thinking about grammatical categories: those by Anders Ahlqvist (1983), Erich Poppe (1996), Abigail Burnyeat (2007), James Acken (2008), Deborah Hayden (2010), and Nicolai Engesland (2021b). Poppe (1999a) extended the concept of *grammatica* onto less studied sources for language-philosophical ideas in early Ireland.

The grammatical output of Irish scholars writing in Latin does not have one central text but is represented by a multitude of works the scholarship on which is sizeable but far from exhaustive. Louis Holtz made a significant contribution to the study of Hiberno-Latin grammatical commentaries and their interconnections (Holtz: 1977a; 1981b; 1991a). The work of Anneli Luhtala on the intersection of grammar and philosophy in Carolingian grammatical discourse should also be noted as it features insightful discussions of the writings of Sedulius Scottus and John Scotus Eriugena (Luhtala 1993; 1996; 2000b; 2002). Important contributions by Poppe (2002) and Rijcklof Hofman (2013) have also emphasised connections between Hiberno-Latin and vernacular grammatical learning.

These works, though they do not have a specific focus on the relationship between language and thought, provide a solid foundation for the present study. As for the more specific questions and concepts which figure in the individual chapters, some of them boast more robust scholarship than others.

Prior to Krivoshchekova (2023) on which Chapter 1 is largely based, the notion of speech sound in Irish learned tradition has not received any dedicated studies. Useful, though very brief, discussions of vernacular phonological concepts (viz. *guth* and *son*) were offered by John Carey (1990: 40–1) and Erich Poppe (1996: 60–2). Moreover, some aspects of Irish approaches to phonetics and phonology, specifically in relation to scholarly reflections on sound-changes in cross-linguistic borrowings as well as on Irish morpho-syntactic patterns, have been discussed by Paul Russell (2012) and Pádraic Moran (2020: 12–14). The study that has provided a theoretical foundation to my own analysis of Irish approaches to speech sound is Wolfram Ax's in-depth exploration of the concept of *vox* in late antique Latin grammars, with special attention paid to its corporeal and incorporeal aspects (Ax 1986).

Chapter 2 of the thesis tackles the concept of letter, focusing on those of its aspects that were understood to transcend the written form. This exploration of the cognitive powers of *littera* was, to a large degree, inspired by David Olson's insightful study of the role of writing as a catalyst for metalinguistic thought (Olson 1994). When discussing Hiberno-Latin accounts of the invention of alphabets, I made use of articles by Jean-Marie Fritz (2004) and Cécile Treffort (2013) which discuss the Carolingian tradition of invention narratives and its origins. The history of writing in vernacular sources, specifically in *Auraicept na nÉces* and *In Lebor*

*Ollaman*, is the subject of a supremely useful article by Roisin McLaughlin (2009), not least due to the fact that she provided edited extracts from *LO* which otherwise remains entirely unedited. These studies informed my own analysis of invention narratives and the way in which medieval scholars understood the connection between forms of writing available to them and the legacy of primeval language. As regards individual letters, a powerful argument for extralinguistic meaning of letter-shapes and the cognitive function of display lettering in Insular manuscripts has been put forward by Benjamin Tilghman (2011a; 2011b). Sergilius' cryptic teachings on letters have been explored by Richard Marshall (2010) and Luigi Munzi (2013–14). Vivien Law (1995: 68–9) briefly but crucially touched upon the advanced treatment of *littera* by Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, who recognised levels of higher meaning inherent in it.

Chapter 3 deals with Irish terminology for 'word' and it builds on a rather robust foundation of existing scholarship. It is in many ways indebted to an article by Erich Poppe (2016) where he tackled a similar topic, exploring the differences between several vernacular terms for word based on the evidence of *Dliged sésa* and the *Auraicept*. My own analysis bolsters Poppe's argument with additional evidence and further develops his ideas. For a similar treatment of Latin terminology in late antique grammar, I turned to a study by Malcolm Hyman (2005). Another area of research that contributed to my argument is the study of early medieval writing practices. Here, Paul Saenger's influential book on word separation in medieval manuscripts and its possible origin in Insular manuscript culture provided important insights into the changing ideas of what constitutes a word (Saenger 1997). At the same time, a more recent study by Bronner et al. (2018) of scribal practices in Irish manuscripts, as well as Anders Ahlqvist's work on declensional paradigms in *Auraicept na nÉces* (Ahlqvist 1974; 2000) suggested that written words often corresponded to stress-units rather than to lexical words. On the other hand, the chapter also turns to the evidence of glossaries. An article by Pierre-Yves Lambert (2003) on *differentiae* as an organising principle for glossaries helped emphasise the function of words, specifically of glossarial lemmata, as lexical units. Another perspective on word highlights its formal qualities and invites orthographic manipulation, often for the purposes of obscuratio. This approach is the most prominent in the writings of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, as was abundantly discussed by Vivien Law (1988; 1989; 1995). Similar techniques can be observed in

vernacular poetic tradition, especially in the context of *trefocal*. They have been examined by Liam Breatnach (2004; 2017) and Deborah Hayden (2011).

Next, the study turns to the problems of signification – a concept as complex as it is important. In order to handle it systematically, Chapter 4 addresses the connection between meaning and form by way of two theoretical developments in Irish learned tradition: classification of definitions and etymology. The interest in definitions in Carolingian, and especially in Hiberno-Latin, grammatical texts has been observed and explored at some length by Vivien Law (1997: 138–46, 154–61) and Cristina Sánchez Martínez (2002). I have also co-published an article on this topic which highlighted a link between Hiberno-Latin grammatical commentaries and Carolingian glosses on Priscian's *Ars grammatica* (Bauer and Krivoshchekova 2022). In the chapter, this work is further transformed in order to focus more closely on the types of signification encoded through different categories of definitions.

Irish etymological practice has been the object of much scholarly attention. In particular, Paul Russell's contribution to the topic cannot be overestimated, with a series of articles that explore various strategies involved in etymological discourse, from creative ways to match sound-patterns of the lemmata and their etymologies to syntactic formulae employed in glossaries, and commented on the practice of *bélrae n-etarscartha* 'the language of separation' (Russell 1988; 2005a; 2008). *Bélrae n-etarscartha* and its potential to multiply etymologies of a single word has also been discussed by Liam Breatnach (2016: 121–4). When discussing etymology as a practice that is not limited to observing simple formal correspondences between words but actively utilises mechanisms of transferred meaning, I relied on two valuable and innovative studies of the powerful heuristic potential of medieval etymology – those by Mark Amsler (1989) and Davide Del Bello (2007). The allegorical dimension of Irish etymology has also been explored by Jan Rekdal (2018).

Chapter 5 addresses the concept of meaning as an incorporeal entity which is a topic that has not yet accumulated a substantial historiography in regard to Irish material. Here, to my knowledge, only one dedicated study can be listed which was, however, of immense importance to this work, – an article by Pierre-Yves Lambert (2016) dealing with the terminology of signification in the Milan and St Gall glosses. Lambert's study laid the necessary groundwork for a systematic examination of

vernacular vocabulary of meaning, which I readily adopt as a starting point for my own analyses of specific terms. Given that Lambert's work is rather short, there is much room to expand his arguments further. For my part, I offer more in-depth treatment of relevant vocabulary and add terms that have not been analysed by Lambert. I also offer two extended case-studies that demonstrate applications of specific vocabulary in the glosses.

The subject of Chapter 6 is hermeneutics with its focus on transferred meaning. Biblical exegesis in general has been the subject of countless studies, some of which have acquired a classic status, such as, for instance, Henri de Lubac's (1959–64 [1998–2009]) monumental panorama of exegetical theories from Clement of Alexandria to the high middle ages or Fridrich Ohly's (1958 [2005]) much more humble study of the spiritual sense in medieval tradition. As for Irish exegesis and the interpretative schemata that it uses, some of the key studies are those by Robert Ramsay (1912) and Martin McNamara (1973; 1986; 2000), both of whom predominantly focus on Psalter exegesis. Whereas Ramsay considered Irish tradition to be an amalgam of the Antiochene and the Alexandrian school, McNamara tends to put more emphasis on the importance of historical interpretation – a position with which I do not entirely agree, as will be shown in the chapter. In an attempt to update Ramsay and McNamara's position, I provide an overview of two exegetical schemata that are often found in Irish sources: a fourfold and a twofold one. A significant contribution to my discussion of the latter has been provided by studies on Eriugena's theory of language, namely those by Werner Beierwalters (1990) and Dermot Moran (1996). Important insights concerning allegorical discourse in Irish tradition can also be found in the works of Elizabeth Boyle (2016; 2019). In addition, I provide a comparison between the twofold exegetical model and the epistemological paradigm associated with poetic learning in the world of secular literature. This case-study is heavily based on one of my recent publications (Krivoshchekova 2021).

Finally, the last chapter deals with Irish accounts of supra- and quasi-linguistic forms of communication which hint at a language-based understanding of thought itself. Here, I relied on a number of informative studies of general European interest. So, for example, the topic of divine language in medieval intellectual tradition is explored by Irven Resnick (1990), the primeval language in Jewish and Christian thought is the topic of insightful articles by Milka Rubin (1998) and Joseph Eskhult

(2014), while John Poirer (2010) offered a book-length study of the language of angels, likewise in Jewish and Christian contexts. Modes of (intellectual) communication between man and God were explored by Daniel Heller-Roazen (2002) in relation to the phenomenon of glossolalia as well as by scholars of Old English literature – Kees Dekker (2005) and Tristan Major (2018) – in relation to the miracle of Pentecost. The superior semantic power of ‘gibberish’, with special attention to Insular evidence, has been investigated by Alderik Blom (2012) and Ciaran Arthur (2019). I have also availed of studies on the concept of mental language as a logical construct in high medieval philosophy by Claude Panaccio (1999 [2017]) and Calvin Normore (1991; 2009).

Scholarship on accounts of intellectual communication in Irish material is rather sparse. It is, however, important to mention John Carey’s prolific work on *In tenga bithnua* where he does often touch upon the questions of angelic language described in that text (Carey 1998; 1999; 2009; 2016). Another study that provided foundation for my argument is Elizabeth Boyle’s discussion of telepathic communication in *Scéla na esérgi* (Boyle 2009). There is also a promise of new research in this area as Ciaran Arthur’s forthcoming monograph on Insular interpretations of biblical linguistic ideas will constitute a major contribution to the field.

Overall, it is evident that much crucial work has already been done on topic of and adjacent to early Irish philosophy of language. This study aims not only to deepen our knowledge on questions that have been previously asked but also to ask and answer new questions. Parts of the argument, especially those dealing with Irish theories of meaning, views on the concept of speech sound and the notion of a mental language present significant advancement of existing scholarship. Moreover, the thesis as a whole is an innovative work that brings together a wide range of sources and assesses them in a methodical manner with the purpose of puzzling together a panorama of early Irish linguistic paradigms that acknowledge and accommodate the role of cognition in the functioning of language.

### ***Note on Translation and Spelling***

Translations from Latin are my own throughout, unless specified otherwise. Translations from Old and Middle Irish are usually supplied by the editors of each specific text. Whenever I modify an existing translation or offer my own, it is indicated accordingly.



Biblical quotes are given according to the fifth edition of the Stuttgart Vulgate (ed. Weber and Gryson 2007). Translations are according to The New Oxford Annotated Bible (trans. Coogan et al. 2018). However, I modify the Oxford translation where necessary as it is based on the Hebrew and Aramaic text for the Old Testament and on the Greek Septuagint for the New Testament, rather than on the Latin Vulgate. Changes to standard translation are individually acknowledged. References to the Psalter are according to the Vulgate numbering.

Regarding the spelling of Latin, I reproduce quotations according to the editions that I am using, preserving the variation in the spelling of the letters *v* and *u* (e.g. *vox* and *uox*). In the editions from *Patrologia Latina*, I substitute the currently accepted spelling of *i* in vowel clusters *io* and *iu* for the outdated spelling *j* (e.g. *Iob* for *Job*, *iustitia* for *justitia*).

## **Part I**

Voice, Letter, Word:  
From Materiality of Language towards Meaning

## Chapter 1: The Study of Speech Sound

### *Speech Sound as a Conceptual Entity*

The study of speech sound in linguistics is shared between the disciplines of phonetics and phonology. Broadly speaking, phonetics deals with the articulation and acoustics of sounds while phonology is concerned with 'the systems and structures' of speech sound (cf. Clark and Yallop 1990: 4). This chapter almost exclusively deals with phonology rather than phonetics, focusing on phonological concepts developed by medieval Irish grammarians. Anticipating the direction of the upcoming discussion, I would like to introduce some modern approaches to sound as a conceptual entity, as opposed to an individual acoustic event.

One of the fundamental reference points for modern linguistics is Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of linguistic sign. Linguistic sign is a unity of the signified and the signifier, of a concept and a 'sound-image' (*l'image acoustique*). The sound image, as de Saussure specified, 'is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses' (Saussure 1977: 66). Indeed, a person can easily think of a word's pronunciation without articulating it out loud.

The idea that phonological units operate primarily as abstractions also became a key hypothesis in cognitive linguistics. Ronald Langacker (1987: 78) echoed de Saussure's statement when he pointed out that 'speech signal must be regarded not just in physical but rather in *psychophysical* terms', since 'usage events are often purely conceptual, with no overt physical representation'. Similarly, John Taylor (2002: 80) noted: 'phonology *is* conceptual in the sense that phonological units can be regarded as concepts – phonological representations reside in the mind, and are invoked in acts of speaking and understanding'. In other words, since speech sound is motivated by cognition, it is by nature a conceptual phenomenon.

Langacker (1987: 76–7) also proposed that language comprises three types of structures: phonological, semantic and symbolic. Symbolic structures are akin to Saussurean linguistic signs in that they are bipolar, possessing a semantic and a phonological pole. All three types of structure exist in their corresponding space: semantic, phonological and symbolic, each representing aspects of human cognition. Langacker defined semantic space as a 'multifaceted field of conceptual potential

within which thought and conceptualization unfold'. Similarly, phonological space 'is our range of phonic potential'. Symbolic space encompasses and coordinates the two others. While this schema is of relevance for a significant part of the discussion in this and upcoming chapters, for now it is important to note that there is a difference between phonological space as the realm of potentiality and phonological representations as concrete acoustic structures that arise from it.

As we explore medieval approaches to the problem of (in)corporeality of speech sound we will find a number of grammarians arguing for an incorporeal approach in a similar manner. This is not to say that medieval and modern thought should be equated. Rather, the considerations regarding modern methodologies are meant to serve as a general framework for this chapter and to illustrate medieval developments with comparable concepts from modern linguistics. Approaching medieval material with an understanding of the present-day scientific paradigms may help us be more sensitive towards innovative ideas in our primary sources.

The chapter comprises two sections. In the first section, I offer a brief overview of the concept of speech sound in late antique tradition where two approaches, materialist and conceptual, coexist side by side. The second section traces the evidence for the incorporeal view of speech sound in Irish sources.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Vox between Corporeality and Incorporeality in Late Roman Grammar***

It was the habit of late antique grammarians to start their manuals with a chapter on *vox*. The term *vox* can be literally translated as 'voice', but it technically refers to a nuanced linguistic concept that can be described as 'speech sound', the primary acoustic material of language.<sup>8</sup> The study of *vox* was strongly rooted in philosophical discussions of the nature of sound – so much so that its study had sometimes been entirely surrendered to philosophers.<sup>9</sup>

In late antique grammar, we find two opposing views on the nature of *vox*: the materialist understanding of the Stoics and the incorporeal understanding of the

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<sup>7</sup> The argument presented in this chapter has been previously published in Krivoshchekova (2023).

<sup>8</sup> While translating *vox* as 'speech sound' is fitting in most cases discussed in this chapter, its usage may at times differ from author to author. To avoid confusion, I will adhere, as much as possible, to using *vox* without translation or translate it literally as 'voice'.

<sup>9</sup> Pompeius, for instance, speaks of *philosophi* in general: *de voce tractare quid est [vox]? hoc philosophorum est* 'discussing *vox* and what it is – this is the task of philosophers' (GL V 96.11–12). Servius ascribes the definition of *vox* specifically to the Aristotelians – *Aristotelicorum est* (GL IV 405.8–9).

Platonists and Aristotelians. In the second century AD, the Roman scholar and miscellanist Aulus Gellius, in his *Noctes Atticae*, summed up the point of contention and identified the philosophical sources on both sides:

*Vetus atque perpetua quaestio inter nobilissimos philosophorum agitata est, corpusne sit vox an incorporeum. [...] Sed vocem Stoici corpus esse contendunt eamque esse dicunt ictum aera; Plato autem non esse vocem corpus putat: 'non enim percussus', inquit, 'aer, sed plaga ipsa atque percussio, id vox est.'* (*Noctes Atticae* V.15; ed. Hertz and Hosius 1886–1903: vol. 1, 190).

[An ancient and eternal question has been debated among the most eminent of philosophers: whether *vox* is a body or is incorporeal. [...] But the Stoics maintain that *vox* is a body and they say it to be struck air; Plato, however, thinks that *vox* is not a body: 'for it is not struck air', he says, 'but the blow itself and the percussion which is *vox*'].

In the fourth century, the grammarian Audax repeated Gellius' account of the philosophical debate almost verbatim (*GL* VII 323.11–14), and so did an anonymous eighth-century author of a treatise titled *De voce* – clearly, the problem had not lost its relevance in the meantime.<sup>10</sup> Having recapitulated the argument, the medieval grammarian adds: *alii dicunt incorporalis est [sic] secundum grammaticos* 'others say that [*vox*] is incorporeal according to grammarians'.<sup>11</sup> As we shall see, crediting grammarians with the strictly incorporeal view rather reflects the developing intellectual landscape of the eighth century, since late antique grammarians generally favoured the Stoicising materialist position (cf. Ax 1986, 268–9).

In late Latin grammar, the most common definition of *vox* saw it as a strictly corporeal phenomenon. It was defined as reverberating air perceived by the ears. This definition, set in similar linguistic formulae, is found in Donatus (*GL* IV 367.6–

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<sup>10</sup> The treatise is preserved in Berlin, Staatsbibliothek – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, MS Diez. B Sant. 66, pp. 343.7–347.5. The manuscript was written in the court of Charlemagne ca. 790 by two scribes, an Austrasian and an Italian. Both display some Insular orthographical features which might suggest an Insular exemplar (Bischoff 1973: 12–14). The text of *De voce* has been recently edited by Elke Krotz and Michael Gorman (2014) in their collection of works of Peter of Pisa. They do not, however, provide an argument for the text's possible authorship and print it alongside a number of other anonymous *opuscula* from the same manuscript.

<sup>11</sup> The full passage reads: *alii dicunt incorporalis est secundum grammaticos; tractatores autem omnes res corporales esse absque sola trinitate [dicunt]* 'others say that [*vox*] is incorporeal according to grammarians. Exegetes, however, [say] that all things are corporeal except the Trinity alone' (Berlin, Diez. B Sant. 66, pp. 344.28–345.1). Krotz and Gorman read this passage differently: *Allii dicunt, incorporalis est. Secundum grammaticos tractatores autem omnes res corporales <sunt> absque sola trinitate* (ed. Krotz and Gorman 2014: 355.57–8). I have some reservations about this reading because (1) in the manuscript, there seems to be no sentence break between *est* and *secundum*; (2) there does appear to be a break between *grammaticos* and *tractatores*, and *tractatores* starts with a capital letter; (3) the manuscript reads *omnes res corporales esse* which I take to be an accusative and infinitive construction missing the verb that introduces it (I supply *dicunt*); emendation to *sunt* seems unnecessary.

7), Marius Victorinus (*GL VI* 4.15–20; 189.11–13) and Diomedes (*GL I* 420.11–14). They divide *vox* into two varieties: *articulata* and *confusa*. While the details may vary, the grammarians agree that *vox articulata* ‘articulated *vox*’ is that which can be written down: if it can be written, it can be understood. *Vox confusa* ‘confused *vox*’, on the other hand, is impossible to represent in letters and, therefore, unintelligible. Conflation of speech and writing leads to the conclusion that only those sounds which have a written form can be properly understood and given the status of language.<sup>12</sup> This also has implications for the concept of letter, as will become evident in the next chapter.

A different, more advanced perspective on this subject matter was introduced by Priscian. Following his Greek sources, he attempts to blend the ‘philosophically incompatible’ positions of Stoicism and Aristotelianism (Irvine 1994: 94–5).<sup>13</sup> The complexity of Priscian’s theory lies in his fourfold classification of *vox*. He distinguishes between *vox articulata* and *vox inarticulata* on the one hand, and *vox litterata* ‘*vox* resolvable into letters’ and *vox illitterata* ‘*vox* not resolvable into letters’ on the other (*GL II* 5.5–6).<sup>14</sup> The sole criterion for classifying *vox* as either articulated or non-articulated is its intelligibility to the mind: *articulata est, quae coartata, hoc est copulata cum aliquo sensu mentis eius, qui loquitur, profertur. Inarticulata est contraria, quae a nullo affectu profiscitur mentis* ‘articulated *vox* is compressed, that is, it is uttered in combination with a certain meaning in the mind of the speaker. Non-articulated *vox* is the opposite: that which comes from no mental experience’ (*GL II* 5.6–8).<sup>15</sup> Priscian’s choice of words – *sensus mentis* ‘mental meaning’, *affectus mentis* ‘mental experience’ – emphasises the role of *vox* as a concept that binds together acoustic expression and mental content of language, the

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<sup>12</sup> This is an instance of the limited ability of late antique grammarians to abstract phonology from orthography which, according to R. H. Robins (1976: 30), impeded the development of phonological theory in Latin grammar.

<sup>13</sup> Priscian generally follows the Stoic doctrine for most of the topics that he handles, and his treatment of *vox* is predominantly materialist: viz. his comparison of *elementa vocis* to *elementa mundi* and viewing speech sound as having height, width and length (cf. *GL II* 6.14–22). However, he can be quite inconsistent, occasionally infusing his work with ‘Aristotelian flavor’ (Luhtala 2000a: 119).

<sup>14</sup> Martin Irvine (1994: 93) translated *vox (il)litterata* as ‘*vox* (not) resolvable into scriptible units’. My translation here is a modification of it.

<sup>15</sup> A similar, though less elaborate, sentiment can be found in Sergius’ definition of *vox*: *vox est aer ictus sensibilis auditu, verbis emissa et exacta sensus prolatio* ‘*vox* is struck air perceptible to the hearing, a precise expression of meaning uttered in words’ (*GL IV* 487.3–4). Wolfram Ax (1986: 56) also noted that Diomedes and Marius Victorinus attempted to include intelligibility as a criterion for *vox articulata* though it remained dependent on its ability to be written down.

two components of a linguistic sign (cf. Irvine 1994: 94). This attention to the production and reception of spoken utterances in relation to cognitive function bears an imprint of psychological orientation characteristic of Aristotle's theory of language.<sup>16</sup>

Priscian's classification brings nuance to the otherwise unchallenged equation of intelligible speech with writing. He points out that *vox* can be articulated, i.e. comprehensible to the mind, while also being impossible to represent in writing (*illitterata*). As examples, he proposes hissing and sighing noises which convey certain information about a person's emotional state but do not have a conventional written form (*GL* II 5.12–13).

Priscian's treatment of *vox* places it in close relationship with mental activity and in doing so pulls focus away from the physical and anatomical aspect of its production.<sup>17</sup> The interplay of the two perspectives has important implications for the upcoming discussion of speech sound in Irish tradition, particularly in relation to meaning. The materialist Stoic doctrine was omnipresent in medieval grammatical discourse, often implicitly. Because in Stoicism meaning is understood to be immanent in the objects of the natural world, and because *vox* (or *φωνή*) is itself such an object, there must exist an isomorphism between meaning and expression (Lloyd 1971: 64–5; Irvine 1994: 35–6). It is not so in Aristotle. While he acknowledges the natural relationship between the thing signified and its mental image, he denies that there is a predetermined relation between expression and meaning. Since *vox* is incorporeal, speakers of a language are free to associate any acoustic shape with any meaning (Lloyd 1971: 64–5; Modrak 2001: 19–21). This position offers a more flexible view of the relationship between meaning and sound: their point of connection is not in nature but in the mind.

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<sup>16</sup> An important part of Aristotelian view of language is the concept of *πάθημα* 'affection' – the internal psychic state of a person and simultaneously the vehicle of meaning shared by speakers of a language (cf. Modrak 2001: 221–2).

<sup>17</sup> Here and in further discussion, I use the term *vox* to refer specifically to *vox articulata* (or *vox articulata litterata*, in Priscian's case), unless specified otherwise. This is because only *vox articulata* can be properly considered to be the subject of grammar, as understood by late antique scholars. Other varieties (*vox inarticulata*, *vox confusa*), as a rule, do not enter the discussion since grammatical categories cannot be applied to them.

## ***Irish Phonological Vocabulary and the Incorporeality of Speech Sound***

*Early-Eighth Century: Quae sunt quae and Dliged sésa*

We now turn to consider several early medieval texts written by Irish scholars working in Ireland and on the Continent, starting with an anonymous text which is known by its opening words: *Quae sunt quae omnem ueritatem scripturae commendant* ‘What are the things that discern the truth of a text?’ or simply *Quae sunt quae*. Dating to the late-seventh or early-eighth century, it is one of the earliest surviving Hiberno-Latin grammatical works.<sup>18</sup>

*Vox* receives considerable attention in *Quae sunt quae*. One of the author’s opening claims on the subject appears somewhat careless at first: *philosophi vocem ita definiunt, ut vox dicatur uniuscuiusque rei sonus* ‘philosophers define *vox* in such a way that *vox* is called the sound of every thing’ (QSQ 36; ed. Munzi 2004: 30). As we have seen, ‘philosophers’, be it Stoics, Platonists or Aristotelians, define *vox* somewhat differently. Our author’s definition rather resembles a similar statement by Pompeius who claimed that *omnis sonus vox dicitur* ‘every sound is called *vox*’ (GL V 99.10).<sup>19</sup> Equating voice with sound in a broad sense might be a vestige of Stoic influence.

However, overall the author of *Quae sunt quae* forges a curious amalgam of corporeality and incorporeality in his treatment of *vox*.<sup>20</sup> Later in the text we find some deliberations on four kinds of priority which, I suggest, are a borrowing from Augustine’s *Confessiones*, reworked to fit grammatical discourse. When discussing the act of creation, Augustine distinguishes between priority in eternity, in time, in preference and in origin:

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<sup>18</sup> Law (1982: 85–7); Munzi (2004: 9–14). A number of features betray its Irish origin: special interest in *tres linguae sacrae*, question-and-answer format where questions and answers are organised into separate lists, the use of specific Hiberno-Latin vocabulary. The text also served as a source for another early eighth-century Hiberno-Latin composition *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum* (Law 1982: 86).

<sup>19</sup> Ax (1986: 45–51) considered the equation of *vox* and *sonus* to have been a deficient development in grammatical theory which nevertheless became ubiquitous in late antique grammar due to the tendency to copy authoritative texts non-critically.

<sup>20</sup> Leslie Lockett (2011: 244–55) made a similar observation concerning the problem of corporality of nouns in relation to their referents. She argues that Insular grammatical tradition, Irish and English, was ingenious in viewing corporeality and incorporeality as a spectrum rather than as absolute attributes. However, as Deborah Hayden (2014: 26–9) noted, the Irish vernacular grammar *Auraicept na nÉces* seems to show that grammarians grappled with the concept of an incorporeal noun ‘because it is not easily reconciled with the idea that all speech sounds consist of corporeal elements’.



*Cum uero dicit primo informem, deinde formatam, non est absurdus, si modo est idoneus discernere, quid praecedat aeternitate, quid tempore, quid electione, quid origine: aeternitate, sicut deus omnia; tempore, sicut flos fructum; electione, sicut fructus florem; origine, sicut sonus cantum. [...] Quis deinde sic acutum cernat animo, ut sine labore magno dinoscere ualeat, quomodo sit prior sonus quam cantus [...]? Neque enim priore tempore sonos edimus informes sine cantu, et eos posteriore tempore in formam canticum coaptamus aut fingimus [...]. Cum enim cantatur, auditur sonus eius [...]. Sed prior est origine, quia non cantus formatur, ut sonus sit, sed sonus formatur, ut cantus sit (Aug. Conf. XII.xxix.40; CCSL 27: 239.8–39).*

[But if he says that first he made the formless creation, and then that with form, his position is not absurd – not at least if he is capable of distinguishing priority in eternity, priority in time, priority in preference, priority in origin. An instance of priority in eternity would be that of God's priority to everything; of priority in time, that of the blossom to the fruit; of preference, that of the fruit to the blossom; of origin, that of sound to song. [...] And then who has a sufficiently acute mental discernment to be able to recognize, without intense toil, how sound is prior to song [...]? For it is not that first we emit unformed sound without it being song, and later adapt or shape it into the form of a song... When a song is sung, the sound is heard simultaneously [...]. But there is priority in origin; for a song is not endowed with form to become sound, but sound receives form to become song (trans. Chadwick 1991: 268–70)].

Augustine warns that priority in origin is a difficult one to grasp, and likens it to the priority of sound to song – *sicut sonus cantum*. The difficulty here appears to concern the state of potentiality in which matter exists prior to receiving form. When somebody sings, we do not hear formless sound at first which is gradually shaped into song. Rather, the song imposes its form on the sound and emerges instantaneously. While there is no temporal precedence of one over the other in their union, sound as matter exists prior to form in a potential state. Already here we can see the merging of the corporeal and incorporeal view of speech sound, even though Augustine uses the unspecific *sonus* for his purposes. Sound is matter (corporeal) but it only exists potentially (incorporeally) prior to being actualised in a linguistic event.

The author of *Quae sunt quae* adapts this argument to grammatical metalanguage with great care, modifying Augustine's text as necessary:

*Quattuor modis praecedit omne quod praecedit, aeternitate, tempore, electione, origine: aeternitate: Deus ante omnia; tempore, flos ante fructum; electione, fructus ante florem; origine, vox ante verbum. Non enim verbum in voce formatur, sed vox in verbum, quia vox informis materia est, nisi verbo litterato syllabisque tradito adiuuetur. Tamen omnis informis materia formam specialem praecedit: igitur ante omnia vox (QSQ 37; ed. Munzi 2004: 30).*

[Everything that precedes [other things] precedes in four ways: in eternity, time, preference, origin. In eternity, God before everything; in time, the blossom before the fruit; in preference, the fruit before the blossom; in origin, *vox* before the word. For it is not the word which is formed in the *vox*, but the *vox* [is turned] into the word, because *vox* is formless matter, unless it is supported by a word resolvable into letters, delivered in syllables. However, all formless matter precedes specific form: therefore, *vox* [comes] before everything].

The author substitutes the technically more precise term *vox* for Augustine's *sonus* while also sneaking in elements of its standard definition (e.g. *vox* can be written down). The existence of this brief but conceptually complex passage is significant. It introduces the important idea that *vox* can exist prior to its articulation, unshaped, as certain phonological potential. At the same time, it is still viewed as corporeal (*materia*). We may describe it as the fundamental phonological material of language.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, the *vox* of *Quae sunt quae* is conceptually reminiscent of the idea of phonological space discussed by Langacker which he similarly described as the 'range of phonic potential'.

The precision with which Augustine's argument is reproduced on the one hand and the ingenuity with which it is adapted to a grammatical context on the other are quite remarkable. I cannot say with certainty whether our author can be credited with this creative work or whether it was copied from a different source. In any case, I have not been able to trace the source of the borrowing. It is worth pointing out that Vivien Law (1982b: 87) considered the text 'notable for its originality'.

Thus it is safe to say that the interior aspect of *vox* occupied Irish scholars from at least the early-eighth century. It receives a deeper treatment in a contemporary vernacular composition (ca. 700) transmitted under the title *Dliged sésa a huraicept na mac sésa* 'Order of Higher Knowledge from the Primer for the Students of Higher Knowledge'.<sup>22</sup> It is a part of *Bretha Nemed Dédenach*, a legal collection concerning the rights and responsibilities of poets.<sup>23</sup> A didactic text for poetic instruction, *Dliged*

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<sup>21</sup> Here I am modifying Malcolm Hyman's (2005: 166 n. 22) description of *vox* in Roman grammar as 'the fundamental acoustic material of language'. Since *Quae sunt quae* emphasises the existence of *vox* in an as yet unrealised state, it appears more appropriate to classify it loosely as a phonological phenomenon.

<sup>22</sup> For an introduction, edition and German translation of the text, see Corthals (2007). A discussion of *Dliged sésa* is found in Poppe (2016: 74–8).

<sup>23</sup> The full collection is edited in Gwynn (1942). On the 'poetico-legal' school of *Bretha Nemed*, see Binchy (1955); Breatnach (1984).

*sésa* offers a view of voice that is unique while still being rooted in the Latinate tradition.

Like Latin grammars, *Dliged sésa* starts with a classification. It introduces six types of *guth*, the vernacular counterpart to the term *vox* which likewise means ‘voice’. However, these six types hardly correspond to any Latin prototypes. Only one pair – *guth alta* ‘jointed voice’ and *guth cumasgtha* ‘confused voice’ – seems to be modelled after the *vox articulata* and *vox confusa* of the Latin tradition.<sup>24</sup> The author proceeds to give a detailed anatomical description of how *guth* is produced in the body, which brings it closer to the Stoic views. Then, among others, these assorted questions and answers follow (the numbering is my own and is added for ease of reference):

(a) *Cid do-gluaisi .i. iomrádh menman.*

[What sets [the voice] in motion? i.e. the speaking of the mind].

(b) *Cidh as sine guth .i. son i mbrāighid.*

[What is older than the voice? i.e. the sound in the throat].

(c) *Cidh as (s)ó guth .i. brīathar sechtair.*

[What is younger than the voice? i.e. the word outside].

(d) *Cidh do-fuismhe guth .i. cíall.*

[What begets the voice? i.e. the meaning].

(e) *Cuin bídh guth .i. i mbél.*

[When is it voice? i.e. in the mouth].

(f) *Caide māthair bréithre .i. guth.*

[What is the mother of the word? i.e. the voice].

(g) *Caide māthair gotha .i. son.*

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<sup>24</sup> Corthals (2007: 140) translated *guth alta* as *erzogene Stimme* ‘mannered’ or ‘fostered voice’, taking *alta* as the past participle of the verb *ailid* ‘nourishes, fosters’ (*eDIL*, s.v.). I believe, however, that *alta* could be taken as the genitive singular of the noun *alt* ‘joint, articulation’ (*eDIL*, s.v.). This would create a parallel to Latin *vox articulata* which, according to Pompeius, is called so because it *potest articulo scribi* ‘can be written with a finger’ (*GL* V 99.13; note that *articulus* primarily means ‘joint’ and by extension ‘limb’ or ‘finger’). This reading also allows us to pair it with *guth cumasgtha* where *cumasgtha* is the past participle of the verb *con-mesca* ‘mixes together’ (*eDIL*, s.v.), a formation parallel to Latin *vox confusa* from *confundere* ‘to mix together’. On the use of the term *alt* in connection to Latin *vox articulata* in the vernacular grammar, *Auraicept na nÉces*, see Hayden (2014: 32–4); on *alt* as a poetic term referring to the juncture between syllabic units, see Hayden (2010: 139–40).

[What is the mother of the voice? i.e. the sound (ed. Corthals 2007: 137; my translation)].

From these statements emerges a coherent account of a speech act: the sound in the throat (b; g) is combined with meaning (d) to produce voice inside the mouth (e); this voice becomes a fully-fledged word when it is expressed outwardly (c; f).

The account of *Dliged sésa* sees *guth* as a pre-verbal sonic shape informed by meaning. In his brief discussion of the text, John Carey described *guth* as the ‘form given to sound by speech, but notionally distinct from both sound and meaning’ (Carey 1990: 41). Here we can observe a significant difference from *Quae sunt quae*. Where the author of the Latin treatise equates *vox* with *sonus*, the scholar behind *Dliged sésa* introduces *son* ‘sound’ as an independent level of analysis, more fundamental than *guth*. Distinguishing between the two is a more advanced approach to the topic of speech sound.<sup>25</sup>

With this different underlying structure, the theoretical content of *guth* is narrowed down. Where *vox* of *Quae sunt quae* combined the corporeal and incorporeal aspect of speech, *Dliged sésa* introduces a clear distinction between the corporeal sound in the throat (*son*), which now acts as the acoustic material of language, and abstract phonological content that exists prior to articulation, properly referred to as *guth*. We can see, then, how different authors make different use of existing terminology to express similar ideas.

Another key feature of *guth* in *Dliged sésa* is its connection to the mind. While *son* is said to be the ‘mother’ of *guth* (g), thought and meaning get the spotlight in (a) and (d). In (a) it is the act of thinking that is said to bring forth the voice. The key expression here is *iomrádh menman* ‘the speaking of the mind’ which, much like in *Quae sunt quae*, hints at an understanding of thought as having a linguistic or a quasi-linguistic matrix – an idea to which we will return in the very last chapter. In this context, *guth* may represent a progression from loose semantic and syntactic structures towards phonological representation. In this sense, *guth* is suspended between the acoustic and the mental dimensions of speech. It is a combination of

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<sup>25</sup> In his discussion of the semantic conflict between *vox* and *sonus* in late antique grammar, Wolfram Ax (1986: 49–50) observed that the practice of separating the two concepts was a more sophisticated development in the study of speech sound, more often found in works of dialectic, such as Boethius’ commentaries on Aristotle.

sonic and semantic potential of language which proceeds from the intellect and does not necessarily require to be manifested in a physical sound.

In (d) we learn that *guth* is born from *cíall* which can denote both ‘meaning’ and ‘mind’.<sup>26</sup> The choice of this term echoes the phrase *iomrádh menman* in (a) on the one hand and acknowledges the fundamental connection between sound and signification on the other. The phrasing here is also significant. The verb used in the question *cidh do-fuismhe guth* ‘what begets the voice’ is *do-fuissim* ‘begets, generates, bears’ (*eDIL*, s.v.). Stating that meaning or mind ‘begets’ the voice creates an interplay with (g) where the relationship between *guth* and *son* is likewise described in terms of parentage.<sup>27</sup> Thus the two ‘parents’ of *guth* – sense and sound – appear to have equal input into their offspring.

These considerations regarding the interiority of *guth/vox* in the two Irish texts and its relation to meaning echo de Saussure’s theory of linguistic sign which we touched upon in the opening of this chapter. The mental content of the sign is paired with a sound image which refers not so much to physical sound as to the ‘psychological imprint of the sound’. This concept agrees well with Irish interpretation of *guth/vox* as an internalised representation or potentiality of expression rather than an actualised speech sound.

#### *Ninth Century: Irish Scholars at Carolingian Centres and the Method of Dialectic*

In the ninth century the discourse of incorporeality in relation to speech sound expanded in another direction, informed by the growing interest of early medieval scholars in dialectic (cf. Marenbon 1981; Luhtala 1996; Law 1997: 154–63). The initial impulse for this new development was their careful study of Priscian. Medieval grammarians accepted his ideas concerning the incorporeality of language as their starting point and took them further.

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<sup>26</sup> On the use of the term *cíall* in the Old Irish glosses, see Lambert (2016: 86–92) and pp. 167–82 below.

<sup>27</sup> Besides, it curiously recalls *Quae sunt quae* where we find the verb *gignere* ‘to bear, to beget’ in a similar context: *non enim extra os gignitur vox, sed intus* ‘vox is begotten not outside the mouth, but within’. Though the text attributes it to Augustine, it is more likely a borrowing from Lactantius’ *De opificio dei*: *non enim uox extra os gignitur, sed intra* (Lact. *De opificio dei* 15.2; *CSEL* 27: 50.12). The same idea also occurs in a short tract on letters titled *De similitudine primae litterae aetati hominis hoc est infantiae*. The text used to be attributed to Peter of Pisa, the court grammarian of Charlemagne, but is now considered anonymous (cf. Bischoff 1973: 28 n. 29). It is found in Bern, Burgerbibliothek 522, ff. 1v–3v and draws on the works of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus (Luhtala and Reinikka 2019: xxviii). With a similar reference to Augustine, it states: *non enim extra os, sed intra uox gignitur* (*AH* 161.2–3).

One of the key passages for the topic at hand is Priscian's bipartite definition of *vox*, which I present here in full:

*Philosophi definiunt, vocem esse aerem tenuissimum ictum vel suum sensibile aurium, id est quod proprie auribus accidit. Et est prior definitio a substantia sumpta, altera vero a notione, quam Graeci ἐννοιαν dicunt, hoc est ab accidentibus. Accidit enim voci auditus, quantum in ipsa est (GL II 5.1–4).*

[Philosophers define *vox* as the finest struck air or its [property] perceptible to the ears, that is, what properly happens to the ears. The first definition is derived from substance and the other from notion, which the Greeks call ἐννοια, that is, from the accidents. Hearing pertains to *vox*, inasmuch as it is in itself].

When Priscian speaks about substance and accident, he refers to the elements of a philosophical definition which had been developed in Porphyry's *Isagoge* and Marius Victorinus' *De definitionibus*.<sup>28</sup> We should note that Priscian's definition of substance – *vox* as struck air – is corporeal in the Stoic sense where substance is understood as a physical entity (cf. Luhtala 2005: 22).

It has been discovered relatively recently that John Scotus Eriugena, widely known as a brilliant Neoplatonic philosopher, also had a keen interest in grammar and wrote a commentary on Priscian's *Ars*.<sup>29</sup> The work, which only survives in fragments, stands out among contemporary grammatical commentaries due to Eriugena's masterful use of logical categories to disentangle Priscian's statements (cf. Luhtala 2000a: 120–4; 2002). Indeed, he does not miss the chance to reflect on the definition of *vox*. Eriugena rightly ascribes to Priscian the Stoic position but himself agrees with Plato and Aristotle: *alii vero philosophi, ut sunt Academici et Peripatetici vocem incorporealem esse adfirmant, quos nos sequimur* 'other philosophers, such as the Academicians and the Peripatetics, whom we follow, maintain that *vox* is incorporeal' (ed. Luhtala 2000a: 145). Eriugena's reasoning is purely technical: if *vox* is an accident (that is, a non-essential attribute) of air and if all accidents are incorporeal, it necessarily follows that *vox* is likewise incorporeal.

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<sup>28</sup> The grammatical theory of definitions is discussed in detail in Chapter 4 (pp. 128–49).

<sup>29</sup> On the attribution of the commentary in Barcelona, Archivo de la Corona de Aragon, Ripoll 59, fol. 257v–288v, see Dutton and Luhtala (1994); Luhtala (2000a; 2000b; 2002). However, Cinato (2011) concluded that this version represents a later recension of the commentary while excerpts from an older version are preserved in the glosses of Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, BPL 67 (one of the Irish Priscian manuscripts), Autun, Bibliothèque municipale, S 44 (40\*) and Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 114.

He then forges a link between the incorporeal *vox* and mental activity in a passage that fits the Aristotelian framework:

[H]umana vox, quae litterata vel articulata dicitur, occultas animi conceptiones in noticiam adducit certisque litterarum ac syllabarum, verborum quoque et sententiarum, rationabilibus motibus discernit (ed. Luhtala 2000a: 145).

[Human *vox*, which is called resolvable into letters or articulated, brings to our attention hidden conceptions of the mind and distinguishes them into clear and rational sequences of letters and syllables, as well as words and sentences].

Eriugena here suggests that *vox articulata* is not the physical act of speaking a language but rather an agent that converts sounds into utterances. On the one hand, it structures and shapes the flow of discourse, from letters to complete utterances. On the other hand, it acts as connecting tissue between linguistic objects and cognition where their semantic content is interpreted. This position bears a striking resemblance to the ideas we have encountered in *Dliged sésa*, though, of course, it is difficult to say how much of his immense learning Eriugena brought with him from his native Ireland.

There was another Irishman of outstanding intellectual achievements who commented on Priscian's definition of *vox* – Sedulius Scottus. His considerations regarding *vox* and *sonus*, likewise informed by a deep interest in dialectic, can be found in his commentaries on Donatus and Priscian, where he proposes an elegant solution to the problem of (in)corporeality of speech sound. Working from Priscian's double definition of *vox* (a substantial definition and a definition through accidents), Sedulius views *vox* itself as substance and *sonus* as its accident. He warns the reader against equating *vox* and *sonus*: *illud autem non est omittendum quod aliud sit uox aliudque sonus uocis* 'it is, however, not to be omitted, that *vox* is one thing and the sound of *vox* is another' (Sed. *In Mai.* 5.75–6). He observes that the sound of human speech can often be harsh and crude, which does not agree with Priscian's statement that *vox* is *aer tenuissimus* 'the finest air' (*GL* II 5.1). This, Sedulius maintains, is evidence that sound perceptible to the ears is only an accident of *vox*. Note that Sedulius, unlike Eriugena, understands accident as having a corporeal manifestation.<sup>30</sup> In the meantime, *vox* itself remains of the 'finest' (*tenuissima*)

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<sup>30</sup> This might be a result of the tendency which Ax (1986: 25–6) attributed to those early medieval grammarians who embraced Priscian's definition *ab accidentibus*, but rather than understanding

substance, undisturbed by the idiosyncrasies of physical sound (Sed. *In min.* 66.3–7). This interpretation is in line with the Aristotelian view of substance (*οὐσία*) which exists as an object of thought, a meaning accessible to the mind, and is at the same time capable of having a physical realisation (cf. Modrak 2001: 175; Luhtala 2005: 16). Despite their differences in ascribing a category to *vox* – for Eriugena *vox* is an accident of air; for Sedulius it is the substance whose accident is sound – the two Irishmen are proponents of philosophically grounded incorporeality which sees *vox* as an internal, pre-verbal resource of language, its phonological material.

#### *Old Irish son as a Phonological Word in the St Gall Glosses*

We have now seen that Sedulius and the author of *Dliged sésa* make a clear distinction between *vox/guth* and *sonus/son*. Where *vox* is understood as the primary phonological material of language or abstract phonological representation of the results of cognition, *sonus* is the more generic sound of any nature. Alongside this approach, Irish grammatical tradition developed an alternative theoretical application for the vernacular term *son*. This alternative usage reaches its full methodological potential in the St Gall glosses – a rich corpus of vernacular and Latin glosses on Priscian’s *Ars grammatica* in St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 904 (=Sg.), written ca. 850.<sup>31</sup> With over 9,000 glosses in both languages (ca. 3,500 in Old Irish and ca. 6,000 in Latin), it is a one-of-a-kind witness for the development of a bilingual grammatical metalanguage.

There are two frequently used phonological terms in the St Gall corpus: *fogur* and *son*, both literally meaning ‘sound’. However, at a closer inspection, one can observe pronounced patterns of usage specific to either term. As I have argued elsewhere, *fogur* is consistently used in the corpus to denote individual phonemes (Krivoshchekova 2023: 16–21).<sup>32</sup> The meaning of the term *son* is more pertinent to the present discussion as it regularly refers to the concept of a complete phonological unit. It is worth noting that this usage is not entirely unique to the St

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‘accident’ in a properly dialectic way, they viewed it in terms of sense-perception, i.e. as a perceptible property of an object.

<sup>31</sup> For a broader discussion of the interaction of Latin and Old Irish in the St Gall glosses, see Moran (2015b). On the dating of the manuscript, see Ó Néill (2000); Hofman (1996: vol. 1, 19–23). The age of the glosses themselves is debated, with some linguistic forms suggesting a date in the seventh century and others appearing contemporary with the manuscript (mid-ninth century) or later (Strachan 1903; Hofman 1996: vol. 1, 43–6; Lambert 1996).

<sup>32</sup> Some aspects of Irish approaches to phonetics and phonology have also been discussed by Paul Russell (2012) and Pádraic Moran (2020: 12–14).



Gall glosses. Erich Poppe observed that in the vernacular grammatical handbook *Auraicept na nÉces* ‘The Scholars’ Primer’ *son* represents the concept of a ‘vocal utterance’ or a ‘word-form’.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the St Gall glosses use *son* in a sense close to the modern concept of a self-contained phonological unit and differentiate it clearly from *fogur*.

In the St Gall corpus, there are 26 attestations of the word *son* across 22 glosses. In the English translation by Stokes and Strachan (*Thes.* II), it is most commonly rendered as ‘word’. Admittedly, this is the easiest solution to keep the translation concise, but there is more theoretical depth to the term. A look at the evidence may provide a clue as to its exact meaning (the corresponding passages from Priscian’s text are given for context):

*cum enim dicimus non posse constare in eadem syllaba r ante p, non de literis dicimus, sed de pronuntiatione earum (GL II 7.2–4).*

[for when we say that r cannot precede p in the same syllable, we do not speak about letters but about their pronunciation].

[gl. *non posse*]: .i. ar chuit aisndisen 7 foguir.

[i.e. as regards pronunciation and sound (Sg. 3b25=3b32zz)].

[gl. *constare*]: .i. hi tosug suin

[i.e. in the beginning of a word (Sg. 3b26=3b33ab)].<sup>34</sup>

This pair of glosses is a good illustration of the difference between *son* and *fogur*. Whereas *fogur* refers to the specific combination of phonemes ‘rp’, *son* denotes the whole phonological unit of which these phonemes may or may not be a part. Translating *son* as ‘word’ is acceptable but what is implied here is the phonological shape of a complete linguistic unit as opposed to a group of individual phonemes. ‘Phonological word’ would be a fitting translation here.

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<sup>33</sup> For *son* as a ‘vocal utterance’ see Poppe (1996: 60–2); for *son* as ‘word-form’ see Poppe (2016: 81 n. 40). He also points out that Irish grammarians, raised on late antique tradition, were likewise prone to conflating the written and the spoken aspects of language and that *son*, therefore, denotes a phonetic and graphic expression simultaneously (Poppe 1996: 61–2). *Auraicept na nÉces* is discussed in more detail below.

<sup>34</sup> I reference the St Gall glosses with two numbers, where possible. In the vernacular glosses, the first number is according to the *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* (*Thes.* II: 49–224); the second number is according to Hofman (1996). Latin glosses are cited after Hofman’s edition only since they were not included in the *Thesaurus*. An online database which combines both editions is available (Bauer, Hofman and Moran 2017). Translations from Old Irish are by Stokes and Strachan (*Thes.* II), though I adapt them slightly for consistency with grammatical terminology used throughout the chapter.

In a different example, Priscian discusses aspiration and how it affects the pronunciation and meaning of words: *nec, si tollatur ea, perit etiam uis significationis, ut si dicam Erennius absque aspiratione, quamuis uitium uidear facere, intellectus tamen permanet* ‘and if it is removed, the force of signification does not disappear, as when I say “Erennius” without aspiration; though I seem to make an error, the meaning still remains’ (GL II 19.1–3). The glossator explains:

[gl. *dicam*]: *do·foirnde in son 7 a folad in·choisig.*

[it determines the sound and the substance which it signifies (Sg. 9a12=9a23kk)].

Here the gloss refers to the name (H)Erennius which, when written, signifies two things: its phonological form (*son*) and its substance (*folad*).<sup>35</sup> The phonological form can be actualised in two different ways – with or without aspiration – which, however, does not affect the signified substance. The corruption of the phonological shape, within certain limits, does not lead to the loss of semantic force.

The relationship between sound and substance merits further exploration as it has direct bearing on the meaning of *son*. *Folad* is a frequent neighbour to *son* in St Gall: the two terms appear side by side on six occasions.<sup>36</sup> One of these glosses comments on Priscian’s explanation of compounds: the component words have meaning by themselves but they can be combined in a compound *ut [...] unam rem suppositam id est significandam accipiat* ‘so that [...] it receives one thing put under [it], that is, what is signified’ (GL II 177.17). This statement is further clarified in a gloss:

[gl. *rem*]: *oinfolad sluindite iarcomsuidigud .i. afolad fosuidigther fondsun.*

[they express one substance after composition, that is, the substance is put under the word (Sg. 73b3=73b11e)].

The Irish phrase *a folad fosuidigther fond sun* ‘the substance put under the word’ neatly reflects Priscian’s phrasing: his (*res*) *supposita* is paralleled in *fosuidigther*, a passive form of the verb *fo-suidigedar* which is a calque of Latin *supponere*, literally ‘to put under’ (*eDIL*, s.v. *fo-suidigedar*). The phrase itself employs an interesting

<sup>35</sup> The notion of *folad* ‘substance’ is discussed at length in Chapter 5 (pp. 182–91).

<sup>36</sup> Sg. 9a12=9a23kk; Sg. 9a16=9a27pp; Sg. 33b1=33b1a and 33a32=33a42zz; Sg. 45b1=45b1b; Sg. 73b3=73b11e; Sg. 138a5=138a14h.

spatial metaphor to describe the relationship between *son* and *folad*: the meaning is couched within the phonological shape of a word without merging with it.<sup>37</sup>

Again, this brings to mind modern approaches to linguistic sign with its bipolar structure, a combination of a semantic and a phonological component. Unlike *vox* or *guth* which represent speech sound as a more amorphous entity, *son* is a self-contained phonological structure that emerges from the primordial sea of ‘voice’ and aligns itself with a similarly distinct semantic structure. The fact that *son* possesses a stable association with certain semantic content reinforces the idea that it is a conceptual phonological unit rather than an *ad hoc* phonetic formation, a purely physical phenomenon.

The juxtaposition of sound and substance runs deep in Irish grammatical tradition and is a result of the growing interest in dialectic. One of its most frequent applications was the classification of definitions, of which Irish grammarians were particularly fond. As I argue in Chapter 4 of this work and elsewhere, the pair *definitio substantiae – definitio soni*, ubiquitously found in ninth-century glossed manuscripts of Priscian, was an ingenious development of Irish grammatical tradition (pp. 128–38; Bauer and Krivoschekova 2022: 94–108). The pair is indeed found in the St Gall Priscian, both in Latin (Sg. 3a1a, 3a33ss) and in Old Irish. The vernacular version is applied to Priscian’s definition of the noun:

*Nomen est pars orationis, quae unicuique subiectorum corporum seu rerum communem uel propriam qualitatem distribuit. Dicitur autem nomen uel a Graeco, quod est νόμα et adiecta ο ὄνομα [...] uel, ut alii, nomen quasi notamen quod hoc notamus uniuscuiusque substantiae qualitatem (GL II 56.29–57.3).*

[Noun is a part of speech which assigns to each corresponding body or thing common or proper quality. The word *nomen* is so called either from the Greek νόμα (and, with *o* added, ὄνομα) [...] or according to others, noun as a note because with it we note the quality of every substance].

[gl. *nomen*]: .i. herchóiliuth folait.

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<sup>37</sup> This type of construction is also attested in the Würzburg glosses on the Pauline epistles (ca. 750) which suggests that imagining sound and sense in this way was not unique to the St Gall glossators. However, in the Würzburg corpus the choice of vocabulary is different: .i. *ni confil tra belre issinbiuthso cenfogur .i. cetorbec dúibsi didiu infogur sind mani fessid inni bess fonfogursin* ‘i.e. there is not, then, a language in this world without sound, that is, what profit to you then (is) this sound unless ye know the sense which is under that sound?’ (Wb. 12d5). Instead of *folad* and *son*, here we find *inne* ‘meaning’ and *fogur*. We should not find the lack of consistency between the two corpora surprising: not only was the Würzburg glossator less concerned with the intricacies of phonological vocabulary in expounding a biblical text, but the language of the Würzburg glosses is generally older than that of St Gall and it is possible that a distinction between *son* and *fogur* had not yet been introduced.

[i.e. definition of the substance (Sg. 27b9=27b33y)].

[gl. *dicitur*]: .i. *herchóiliuth suin*.

[i.e. definition of the sound (Sg. 27b13=27b38gg)].

Here, the ‘definition of the substance’ refers to the core grammatical meaning of *nomen* in its ability to signify quality. The ‘definition of the sound’ is the derivation of the word *nomen* from Greek *ὄνομα* or from Latin *notamen*. In addition to acknowledging the proximity of phonological shape between these words, the definition of sound also creates a semantic link based on said proximity: *ὄνομα* is indeed the Greek word for ‘noun’ while the connection to *notamen* is functionally justified in Priscian’s etymology.<sup>38</sup>

The usage of *son/sonus* in the ‘definition of sound’ glosses conforms to the pattern observed in the St Gall corpus and is evidence of conceptual influence going from Irish to Latin. Old Irish *son* in its grammatical sense of a complete phonological unit contributed this additional technical meaning to Latin *sonus* which did not have this meaning in late antique grammars but is now likewise understood as the phonological shape of a word, particularly in the context of the theory of definitions.<sup>39</sup>

The discussion of sound and sense as a complementary pair holds an equally prominent place in other vernacular and Hiberno-Latin writings. *Auraicept na nÉces*, for example, uses the (dis)agreement between sound and sense – *son* and *cíall* – to contrast the formation of regular and suppletive forms of comparison:

*Caite condelg ceilli cen son, 7 condelg suin cen cheill, 7 condelg suin 7 ceilli molle? Condelg ceilli cen son, ut est: bonus, melior, optimus. Condelg suin cen ceill, ut est: bonus, bonior, bonimus; nobhiadh iar sun sain 7 ni fil iar ceill. Condelg suin 7 ceilli malle, ut est: magnus, maior, maximus is i in sin in condelg techta.*

[What is comparison of sense without sound, and what is comparison of sound without sense, and comparison of sound and sense together? Comparison of sense without sound, *ut est bonus, melior, optimus*. Comparison of sound without sense, *ut est bonus, bonior, bonimus*; which it

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<sup>38</sup> The pair *definitio substantiae – definitio soni* appears as parallel glosses on the same lemmata in another manuscript of the Irish recension of Priscian in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, MS lat. 10290, f. 19v25–6.

<sup>39</sup> In Latin grammar, this function was sometimes fulfilled by the term *vox*. Varro, for instance, used *vox* in the sense of an ‘overt phonological representation of a word’ (Taylor 1974: 93). While this usage does not appear to be as clearly defined in Priscian or other late antique grammars, it is worth acknowledging that the term *vox* occasionally refers to a defined phonological unit rather than to speech sound in general. This usage is also not uncommon outside of grammatical discourse.

might be according to sound, but it does not exist according to sense. Comparison of sound and sense together, *ut est magnus, maior, maximus*, that is the proper comparison (*Auraic.* 698–703)].

Here, the commentator concludes that in irregular formations sense prevails over sound. There is no perceivable phonological similarity in case of *bonus – melior – optimus*. If sound were given primacy, we would get regular but nonsensical *bonus – bonior – bonimus*.<sup>40</sup> The usage of *son* in this passage is informed by the same technical discourse that we found in the St Gall glosses. The sound as an abstract phonological shape exists alongside mental content associated with it; its final representation depends on meaning to justify its existence in a linguistic system defined, to a large degree, by convention. The pair *son – ciall* as a tool for characterising phonological and semantic aspects of morphological transformation appears again in relation to a different grammatical topic – declension of nouns.<sup>41</sup> Here too a distinction is made between a formal transformation of the word that is being inflected and the abstract meaning which is associated with a given case.<sup>42</sup>

It must be acknowledged, however, that the *Auraicept* is not entirely consistent in its use of phonological vocabulary. On one occasion, for instance, *son* refers to individual phonemes (*Auraic.* 253) while on another, *fogur* is used in the sense of ‘phonological word’ (*Auraic.* 1695–6, 1699–1700). These inconsistencies might have resulted from the gradual growth of the commentary between the late-seventh and the late-eleventh century with contributions from multiple generations of scholars.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> For a more detailed study of the grades of comparison in Irish grammatical tradition, see Russell (2020). Parallels to this passage in ninth-century Hiberno-Latin grammars (Murethach, Sedulius Scottus) are discussed in Poppe (1996: 60–1). Deborah Hayden (2013: 103–8) examined the same passage across different manuscript witnesses of the *Auraicept*.

<sup>41</sup> See *Auraic.* 792–5. Poppe (1996: 63–4) discussed this passage and suggested that the ‘declension of sense’ (*reim ceilli*) was understood to be defined by syntactic structures. An example of this are the identical nominative and genitive singular forms of the name *Patraic*. Being indistinguishable in sound (*son*), their meaning must be inferred from the syntactic context.

<sup>42</sup> This idea also occurs in non-grammatical discourse. The Milan glosses (ca. 800) make note of the fact that the form of a word may not grammatically match its meaning. For instance, the word *cunctus* ‘whole, all collectively’ is glossed with *is ilar s6n huacheill ciasu huathatae ho sun* ‘it is plural in sense, though it is singular in sound (Ml. 45b20). However, in a similar example given by Lambert (2016: 91), the glossators use the term *deib* ‘form’ instead of *son*: *insin ciall ainsedo illdai duerbirt as in gerint fil for deilb ainsedo* ‘the sense of the accusative plural is to be taken from the gerund which is in the form of the accusative’ (Ml. 68c14).

<sup>43</sup> According to Anders Ahlqvist (1983: 31–6), the ‘canonical core’ of the *Auraicept* emerged in the late seventh century after which it had been accruing commentary until the twelfth century. Rijcklof Hofman (2013: 192–7) suggested that the text was designed to carry glosses from the beginning, and Erich Poppe (2002) argued that the bulk of the scholia developed in the ninth century, based on the parallels with Hiberno-Latin grammars of that period (Sedulius Scottus, Murethach, *Ars Laureshamensis*). Deborah Hayden (2012; 2023) noted that certain parts of the commentary belong

Irish grammarians writing in Latin likewise showed great interest in the juxtaposition of sound and sense from an early date. The author of the eighth-century text *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum* fruitfully applies the dichotomy *intellectus – sonus* to grey areas of grammar, where semantic patterns stop following regular phonological and morphological patterns, in a way that anticipates the *son – cíall* discussion in the *Auraicept*. He comments on how the genitive plural form of a noun which follows an adjective in the superlative degree (as in ‘Hector was the strongest of the Trojans’) can be expressed by a singular form:

*Satis quippe facitur huic quaestioni considerantibus nobis non sonum, sed intellectum horum nominum: ‘plebs’ etenim et ‘gens’ et ‘ager’ et ‘genus’ sono sunt singularia, intellectu vero pluralia et diuidua sunt; et ideo genetiuo semper plurali superlatiuum, sed aliquando sono aliquando intellectu, iungi dicit Donatus gradum (Ad Cuimn. 44.167–70).*

[In fact, for this question it is sufficient for us to consider not the sound, but the meaning of those words: for ‘folk’, ‘people’, ‘land’ and ‘race’ are singular in sound, but plural and divisible in meaning; and therefore Donatus says that the superlative degree is always joined by genitive plural, although sometimes in sound and sometimes in meaning].

These reflections on the complex relationship between linguistic structures and their mental content reveal the grammarians’ growing awareness of the arbitrary connection between form and meaning. *Son/sonus* is closely connected to sense or substance but can be analysed independently from it as a purely abstract phonological object. Meaning is not inherent in it but rather ascribed to or ‘put under’ it.<sup>44</sup>

The highlighting of phonological and semantic aspects of a word as a linguistic sign receives further development in other Hiberno-Latin works. However, ninth-century grammarians – Murethach, Sedulius Scottus and the anonymous author of the *Ars Laureshamensis* – introduce an important terminological change: they replace *sonus* with *litteratura*, which takes the emphasis away from sound and puts it onto its graphic representation. Erich Poppe discussed such examples and concluded that they share common sources with the passages from the *Auraicept* which make use of the *son – cíall* distinction (Poppe 1996: 60–1; 2002: 298–9). How,

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to the late-medieval period. Most recently, Nicolai Engesland (2021a) suggested that the date of initial composition should be moved from the eighth to the late-ninth – early-tenth century.

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of the *sonus – intellectus* pair as a broader distinction between the linguistic system and extraverbal reality in the late-seventh–early-eighth-century *Ars Ambrosiana*, see Amsler (1989: 215–16). On the text’s Hiberno-Latin source, see O’Rourke (2020).

then, can we reconcile this observation with the use of *son* in the vernacular sources? It is possible that *son/sonus* was a part of an older tradition since it was used in the eighth century in *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum*. This usage might have been more stable in the vernacular metalanguage, which explains why the *Auraicept* and the St Gall glosses continue to use *son* with its phonological connotations even after Irish grammarians at the Carolingian centres increasingly brought their terminology in line with the late antique tradition, where the distinction between sound and writing is more blurred.

### ***Conclusion***

The foregoing exploration of phonological vocabulary in Irish grammatical tradition has revealed several key directions of theoretical development. Building upon their careful reading of Latin sources and extraordinarily prolific vernacular learning, the Irish *grammatici* were able to observe the nuances in the discussions of speech sound.

Dealing with the concept of *vox* or *guth*, grammarians recognised both its corporeal and incorporeal interpretation. The anonymous author of *Quae sunt quae* emphasised the role of *vox* as the phonological material of language which exists as an abstraction prior to being used in a specific speech act. In the vernacular *Dliged sésa*, the term *guth* is similarly understood as an intermediary between cognition and speech act but seems to more specifically denote abstract phonological representation of concrete linguistic objects. In the ninth-century sources produced by Irish scholars on the continent, these ideas continue to thrive, with Eriugena and Sedulius Scottus essentially agreeing that *vox* is not the physical sound of speech but rather the underlying phonological structures that exist incorporeally and convert thought into utterances.

In the St Gall glosses, the term *son* rises to prominence and helps to denote a complete phonological unit which is connected to a specific meaning. Unlike *vox/guth* which rather represents a potential for linguistic expression than expression itself and encompasses production of individual words as well as complex discourse, *son* can be seen as an objective and specific form, an abstract acoustic envelope of one self-contained linguistic unit which is connected with a certain meaning. We have also seen that *son* and, under the influence of this vernacular usage, Latin *sonus* are used in the same sense in *Auraicept na nÉces* and

*Anonymus ad Cuimnanum*. These texts seem to represent the same branch of tradition in that they emphasise the juxtaposition of the phonological and semantic aspects of a linguistic sign. This changes in ninth-century Hiberno-Latin grammars where authors replace *son/sonus* with *litteratura*, thus shifting focus from sound to writing.

Overall, this section has established that a conceptual understanding of phonological structures was an important part of Irish grammatical tradition. The emphasis on the incorporeal nature of *vox/guth* and *son* suggests that underlying phonological representations were understood to participate in cognitive processes.



## Chapter 2: The Study of Letter

### *Lessons from Deconstruction*

In his innovative and influential work *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida (1967; trans. 1976) made the argument that European philosophical tradition has always imagined spoken language as the primary physical manifestation of language, with writing considered to be a derivative form of expression. He called this tradition 'phonocentrism' and traced it back as far as Aristotle (Derrida 1976: 11).<sup>45</sup> However, for Derrida, writing is a much broader concept than just graphic symbols representing speech sounds. It embodies the possibility of signification in general: it 'signifies inscription and especially the durable institution of a sign' (Derrida 1976: 44). Writing thus represents the very possibility of a sign, the meaningful essence of thought and speech (Staten 1984: 61).

Similarly, David Olson (1994: 282) proposed that writing played a key role in shaping our cognition: 'Writing and reading played a critical role in producing the shift from thinking about things to thinking about representations of those things, that is, thinking about thoughts'. Through writing, aspects of spoken language turn into objects of contemplation (Olson 1994: 258–60). This gives rise first to linguistic reflection and grammatical theory and, consequently, to logic and scientific thought.

Much like in the previous chapter, it is not my aim to directly compare these contemporary ideas about writing to what we find in medieval texts. Derrida's approach does, however, provide an instructive departure point for our discussion of *littera*. One may start by acknowledging the late antique grammatical accounts of writing which view letters as complex signs, not limited to simply representing speech, thus moving in a direction anticipated by Derrida. As Françoise Desbordes (1990: 11) observed, in classical and medieval Latin culture the term *littera* refers simultaneously to *les caractères de l'alphabet et les plus hautes manifestations de la vie intellectuelle* 'the characters of the alphabet and the highest manifestations of intellectual life'. In Latin grammar, *littera* came to be understood not just as a written mark but as 'a very sophisticated concept – a structural element of language, with two aspects or realizations, one visible and one audible' (Abercrombie 1949:

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<sup>45</sup> Aristotle's theory of language is outlined in Chapter 5 (pp. 164–6). But see Joseph (2018: 59–60) for the argument that, similarly to grammarians, Aristotle understood speech sound as both spoken and written.

59; cf. Vogt-Spira 1991; Irvine 1994: 97).<sup>46</sup> At the end of the previous chapter we too have observed that Irish grammarians of the ninth century started to adopt the late antique association of language as form specifically with writing rather than with sound.

The present chapter offers an examination of the topic of writing as a linguistic and cognitive activity. It comprises two sections, one dealing with ideas on the origin of writing and another exploring the extralinguistic significance assigned to alphabets and letters in various contexts. Investigating views of the invention of alphabets among different peoples will provide insights into the place assigned to writing within the history of mankind. We will see how narratives about the origins of the alphabets helped create the perception of an unbroken continuity of writing between the original Adamic language and Latin (or sometimes Irish), bypassing the difficult problem of linguistic diversity created after Babel. In this view, writing is presented as the most reliable linguistic constant. This will set the stage for exploring Irish approaches to the extralinguistic signification of letters. Though we cannot and should not expect Derrida's and Olson's theories to be anticipated in early medieval texts, there are, like in the previous chapter, certain insights to be gained from examining medieval ideas against their background. Letter as a token of the very notion of signification is not too far removed from Christianity's reverence for Scripture, literally 'writing'. Likewise, Olson's idea that writing turns thoughts into objects of reflection works not only on the level of words and utterances but, as I will demonstrate, on the level of *littera*. After all, does not the entire discipline of *grammatica* grow out of a *gramma*?

### ***The Origins of the Alphabet: Linguistic Diversity and Linguistic Continuity***

#### *The Sources*

This section focuses on a group of formulaic narratives about the origins of different alphabets attested in a number of sources with Hiberno-Latin connections. They are

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<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that some grammarians, particularly Diomedes and Priscian, do differentiate between an *elementum*, the smallest unit of *vox articulata* (or *vox litterata* for Priscian), and a letter as its *figura* (for Diomedes, see *GL* I 421.15–26; for Priscian, *GL* II 6.24–7.7). Priscian clarifies: *hoc ergo interest inter elementa et literas, quod elementa proprie dicuntur ipsae pronuntiationes, notae autem earum literae* 'the difference between elements and letters is that elements are properly called pronunciations, whereas letters are their [written] marks' (*GL* II 6.24–7.1). He specifically warns the reader against confusing the two although, ironically, he fails to adhere to his own terminology: his chapter on the letter is almost entirely based on the model where the term *littera* encompasses both the visible and the audible.

rather numerous and it would be impossible to discuss all of them in detail here. However, it is worth providing an overview of available sources. The key witnesses of the invention narrative are four Hiberno-Latin grammars: treatises by Donatus Ortigraphus (DO) and Clemens Scottus (Clem.), Murethach's *In Donati artem maiorem* (Mur.) and the anonymous *Ars Laureshamensis*, likewise a commentary on Donatus (*Laur.*). It has been shown that DO and Clem. are related to each other, as are Mur. and *Laur.*<sup>47</sup> The account of the invention of the alphabets also appears in the Donatus-commentary by Remigius of Auxerre whose grammatical writings were influenced by Hiberno-Latin tradition, specifically Murethach, with whom his older colleague Haimo studied grammar at Auxerre. Overall, Remigius' version of the invention-narrative combines elements of the two Hiberno-Latin groups (DO–Clem. and Mur.–*Laur.*) with one independent addition.<sup>48</sup>

While the four Hiberno-Latin grammars are – clearly – Latin and can be approximately dated to the first half of the ninth century, there are also two vernacular witnesses to this narrative: one in *Auraicept na nÉces* the dating of which is notoriously problematic (cf. n. 43 above) and a Middle Irish commentary on it known as *In Lebor Ollaman*. The latter text has received little to no study and does not have an edition. All discussion of *LO* in relation to alphabets will be based on an article by Roisin McLaughlin (2009).

In addition to these undoubtedly Irish sources, the history of the creation of the alphabets is also attested in a number of anonymous Carolingian treatises on letters. Some of these texts have been edited and studied individually before but never as a cohesive textual family.<sup>49</sup> The invention narrative, in a more or less detailed form, is found, to my knowledge, in seven such treatises:

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<sup>47</sup> John Chittenden (1982: xxxvii–xxxix) suggested that DO and Clemens likely share the same (lost) source or that DO is relying on Clemens directly or through an intermediary ('it is certain that Clemens is not the borrower'). Louis Holtz (1973) has conclusively shown that Murethach and *Laur.*, together with the Donatus-commentary by Sedulius Scottus, share a common prototype which can be dated to the eighth century. Of the three texts Murethach's work, written in the 840s in Auxerre, is closest to the supposed prototype. Bengt Löfstedt (1977a: xiii–xiv) has suggested that the author of *Laur.* introduced noticeable innovations, and this updated text served as a source for Sedulius. Significantly, Sedulius entirely omits the invention-narrative in his commentary.

<sup>48</sup> It being the addition of Ulfilas as the inventor of the Gothic alphabet. This may be a borrowing either from Eugenius of Toledo's *Carmen 39 De inventoribus litterarum* (ed. Vollmer 1905: 257) or from Julian of Toledo's *Ars grammatica* where Ulfilas is likewise added to the list of inventors (ed. Maestre Yenes 1973: 114.33–115.57). Ultimately, the reference to Ulfilas and the Gothic alphabet seem to come from Isidore's *Historia gothorum*. See Denecker (2018: 153–7).

<sup>49</sup> A useful list of such anonymous letter-tracts has been compiled by Zetzel (2018: 360–2).

1. **(D)** Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, MS Diez. B Sant. 66 (Austrasia/Italy, s. viii<sup>ex</sup>): *De littera*, pp. 68–76 (ed. Krotz and Gorman 2014: 337–42);
2. **(I)** Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, MS Lat. Fol. 641 (Northern Italy, s. ix<sup>ex</sup>–x<sup>in</sup>): *Littera est pars minima*, ff. 14v–16v (unedited);
3. **(F)** Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS 207 (Fleury, s. viii<sup>ex</sup>): *De littera*, ff. 112r–113r (ed. Munzi 2007: 23–5);
4. **(B)** Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS 417 (region of Tours, s. ix<sup>1-2/3</sup>): *Expositio de litteris quomodo nominantur uel quale sonum habeant inter se*, ff. 94r–95r (AH lii–liii);
5. **(R)** Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS 522 (Reims, s. ix<sup>1/3</sup>): *Tractatus multorum grammaticorum de litteris*, f. 2r (AH xxxviii);
6. **(A)** Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS A.92.34 (s. xi–xii): *De litteris communibus*, ff. 6r–7r (AH liii–liv);
7. **(G)** St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 877 (St Gall, s. viii<sup>ex</sup>–ix<sup>in</sup>): *Interrogatio de litteris*, pp. 67–88 (unedited).

I have recently completed a short-term research project which focused on one of these texts, *Interrogatio de litteris* found in **G**. The goal of the project was to examine its manuscript context and possible connections to Hiberno-Latin tradition. I have established that this treatise is closely related to similar texts in **F** and **D**.<sup>50</sup> It appears that *De litteris* in **F**, which was copied in a ‘Continental-Irish minuscule’ at Fleury in the late-eighth century, was presumably written in the mid-eighth century (Munzi 2007: 18).<sup>51</sup> It thus represents the earliest version of the text. An expanded version of it then appears in **D** which was produced ca. 790. *Interrogatio de litteris* in **G**

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<sup>50</sup> The project titled ‘Anonymous Carolingian Letter-Tracts and Irish Grammarians: Establishing a Textual Network for Early Medieval Linguistic Theory’ was funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). It took place between March and July 2022 and was based at the Friedrich Meinecke Institute of the Free University of Berlin. I am currently preparing an edition and commentary on the St Gall treatise for publication.

<sup>51</sup> The term ‘Continental-Irish’ to describe the script of **F** was introduced by W. M. Lindsay (1923: 61–5; 1910: 64–7) who observed a number of Irish features in the two scribes’ work as well as the style of decoration. This suggestion was accepted by a number of other scholars (Rand 1922: 269–70; Boyer 1937: 113–15; Holtz 1981a: 361). Regarding the Ogam alphabet copied alongside a number of other alphabets, René Derolez (1951: 3–11; 1954: 192) pointed out that the scribe displayed ‘an intimate knowledge’ of Ogam, suggesting an Irish background. More recently, Krotz and Gorman (2014: xxxvi) brought attention, though rather judgementsally, to the use of the ‘curious and annoying Irish practice’ in **F** of continuing run-over text into the empty space in the line above which ‘would scarcely have been tolerated’ by continental scribes. On this practice and its Irish background, see Brown (1996: 120–1); McLaughlin (2021).

represents the longest and presumably the latest version of this text, with the manuscript dating to the early-ninth century.

For our purposes here, it is worth making a few remarks on the Irish connections of these texts. While they cannot be ascribed to Hiberno-Latin tradition with certainty, they do display a number of features which suggest such an influence. The parallels to the invention-narratives in Hiberno-Latin grammars have already been pointed out by Luigi Munzi (2007: 27). All three texts also list the words for ‘letter’ in Latin, Greek and Hebrew which may be an artefact of the special interest in the *tres linguae sacrae* among Irish scholars.<sup>52</sup>

The very form of these narratives, pedantically inquiring about and naming people who were the first to invent an alphabet, could also be considered an Irish ‘symptom’, according to Bernhard Bischoff.<sup>53</sup> However, it should be noted that a catalogue of inventors as a literary genre has existed at least since classical antiquity and is known as a *heuremata*-catalogue (Thraede 1962). Such a catalogue concerning specifically the inventors of various alphabets was compiled already by Pliny the Elder in the first century AD (*Nat. hist.* VII.56.192–3; ed. Mayhoff 1875: 48–9). Among late Latin grammarians similar lists can be found in Marius Victorinus (*GL VI* 23.14–22), Maximus Victorinus (*GL VI* 194.11–17) and Audax (*GL VII* 325.1–7).<sup>54</sup> Since nothing is new under the sun and since, as will be discussed shortly, the core of the invention-narrative in all our witnesses is Isidore’s *Etymologiae*, it could be argued that this type of composition cannot be classified as specifically Irish. Nevertheless, our texts, while building on Isidore’s account, expand it considerably, particularly by adding details of the transmission of the alphabet before the Flood, which are absent from Isidore. The evidence of DO–Clem. and Mur.–*Laur.* and what has been established about their prototypes suggests that the narrative in this exact shape undoubtedly circulated in Ireland in the eighth century, even if it was not composed there directly.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> On the *tres linguae sacrae* in Irish tradition, see Bischoff (1954: 207–8), McNally (1958), Howlett (2002); cf. Resnick (1990: 60–72).

<sup>53</sup> Bischoff (1954: 211, 230) pointed out that this motif, while present in the patristic tradition, reaches its peak in the so-called *Bibelwerk* or the ‘Irish Reference Bible’, an eighth-century Hiberno-Latin exegetical compilation.

<sup>54</sup> On the historical accounts of writing in classical grammar, see Desbordes (1990: 135–60); Denecker (2017: 354–7).

<sup>55</sup> If Munzi’s dating of *De litteris* in **F** is correct, the text could be related to the hypothetical lost source of Murethach and *Ars Laurehamensis*.

In my work on **G**, I have identified two further links to Hiberno-Latin tradition. Although they occur in a different part of the treatise and are absent in other letter-tracts, these findings strengthen the overall case for Hiberno-Latin influence on this group of texts. So, for instance, the definition of anagoge as a literary trope in **G** is a borrowing from the eighth-century Hiberno-Latin grammar *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum* (although there it is given as the definition of dialectic).<sup>56</sup> Another connection to an Irish milieu is found in the section where the author/compiler discusses long and short vowels, each illustrated with a poetic example. These mostly come from expected sources: Virgil, Caelius Sedulius, Augustine. One example, however, is taken from a poem by an Irishman called Colmán who emphatically styled himself as *Colmanus Scotigena*.<sup>57</sup> The poem is addressed to his fellow monk and is a farewell to him, wishing him a safe return to Ireland. Elsewhere in the text, the author of **G** expresses dismay at the lack of fitting poetic examples for a different grammatical problem: *sed in nostratis poematibus non facile huiusmodi reperies exempla* ‘but you will not easily find examples of this kind in the poems of our country’ (**G** p. 76.8–10). It is tempting, in light of the Colmán citation, to interpret *nostratia poemata* as referring to Hiberno-Latin poetry.

Having thus established the invention-narrative as a part, if not an original development, of Hiberno-Latin grammatical tradition, we can now turn to an overview of its milestones and analysis of their significance.

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<sup>56</sup> The text in **G** reads: *A[na]gogen superior sensus proponit, adsumit, consumit, concludit* ‘Anagoge – the higher sense – proposes, takes up, uses up, concludes’ (p. 88.18–20). Compare it to *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum*: *[dialectica] iiii haec agit: proponit, adsumit, confirmat, concludit: id est proponit problesma, adsumit doctrinam, confirmat testimoniis, concludit perfectione* ‘[dialectic] does these four things: proposes, takes up, confirms, concludes; that is, proposes problems, takes up a doctrine, confirms with evidence, concludes in perfection’ (*Ad Cuimn.* 9.289–92). Apart from replacing dialectic with anagoge as the subject of the definition, the St Gall text also changes the third element in the list of verbs – *consumit* instead of *confirmat*. However, this can be explained as a copying mistake by analogy with the preceding *adsumit*. The idea of the four-stage dialectic argument ultimately draws on a similar scheme proposed by Jerome: *omnisque dialecticae proponit λήμματα, propositione, adsumptione, confirmatione, conclusionem determinat* ‘and it sets forth all matters of dialectic; it determines [them] through proposition, introduction [of postulates], corroboration, [drawing a] conclusion’ (Jerome, *Epist.* LIII.8; *CSEL* 54: 455.10–11). The version found in *Ad Cuimn.* is therefore an independent reworking of Jerome. It is also found in a similar form Clemens’ grammar (ed. Puckett 1978: 69.5–6) and in a late-eighth-century Hiberno-Latin commentary on the Pauline epistles (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 6235, f. 3ra22–25). The evidence of transmission rather decisively points to a Hiberno-Latin origin of this motif.

<sup>57</sup> The borrowed line is as follows: *Vincit amor patriae. Quis flectere possit amantem?* ‘Vanquished art thou by love of thine own land, / And who shall hinder love?’ (ed. Esposito 1932: 116, line 5; trans. Waddell 1948: 75). This line is found in **G** on p. 74.11–13. On the poet Colmán, see Raby (1932: 361–2), Ó Cróinín (2005: 392–3; 1995: 217–8).

### *The Invention Narrative*

As mentioned, at the heart of all of our texts is Isidore's account of the invention of various peoples' alphabets. It starts with Abraham, who is said to have invented the Syriac and the Chaldean (Aramaic) alphabets, and Moses, who is responsible for the Hebrew alphabet. Isidore emphasises the fact that Syriac and Chaldean letters are the same *numero et sono* 'in number and sound' as Hebrew and differ from each other only in their graphic shape (*Etym.* I.iii.5). After this, Isidore discusses the Egyptian letters and their inventor, queen Isis. Rather than the Ancient Egyptian deity, this Isis is identified with Io, daughter of Inachus, king of the Argives, which allows Isidore to portray the Egyptian alphabet as less ancient than Hebrew. For this, Isidore's source is undoubtedly Augustine's *De civitate dei* XVIII.37–8 (*CCSL* 48: 632–4). The next step in the history of writing, according to Isidore, is the Greek alphabet invented by the Phoenicians and brought to Greece by Cadmus, son of Agenor and the legendary founder of Thebes. This alphabet initially consisted of seventeen letters, with another seven added later by Palamedes, the hero of the Trojan war, the poet Simonides of Ceos and Pythagoras (*Etym.* I.iii.5–7). The final milestone in Isidore's account is the invention of the Latin alphabet which he ascribes to the nymph Carmenta, known as Nicostrate in Greek, who brought Greek letters to Italy (*Etym.* I.iv.1).<sup>58</sup>

What is important to note about Isidore's schema is that it starts after Babel, that is, after the original Adamic language gave way to linguistic multiplicity as a result of human folly. In *Etymologiae*, Isidore does not specify whether there was any kind of writing before Babel but in *Chronica maiora* he does mention, with a reference to Flavius Josephus, that before the Flood the descendants of Cain wrote down (*conscripterunt*) their scientific discoveries on two pillars, one made of brick and another of stone. This was done so that at least one of them would survive in the eventual cataclysm which, according to prophecy, would involve either water or fire (Isid. *Chron.* 16; *MGH AA* 11: 428). It is not clear, however, what alphabet was used for this purpose.

This narrative is, to some degree, present in all anonymous letter-tracts, except for **R**. The names that reappear with the most consistency are Abraham, Moses, Cadmus and Carmenta. Isis is only present in the accounts of Murethach, *Ars Laureshamensis*,

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<sup>58</sup> On Isidore's sources for this account, see Denecker (2017: 363–70).

**D** and **I**, while the extended history of the Greek alphabet after Cadmus is exclusive to Donatus Ortigraphus. At the same time, all our texts, with the exception of **I** which is the closest to Isidore, pick a much earlier starting point for the birth of writing, unanimously crediting Enoch, in the seventh generation after Adam, as the first inventor of letters. This appears to be based, though perhaps indirectly, on the Book of Jubilees 4:17:<sup>59</sup> '[Enoch] was the first of mankind who were born on the earth who learned (the art of writing), instruction, and wisdom and who wrote down in a book the signs of the sky in accord with the fixed pattern of their months' (trans. VanderKam 1989: 25–6). Enoch's name also appears in Augustine's discussion of the origins of the Hebrew wisdom in *De civitate dei*. He implies that wisdom, understood as a certain body of learning belonging to a certain people, cannot exist without writing.<sup>60</sup> While he himself believes that the Hebrew wisdom (and therefore writing) can reliably be traced back 'only' as far as Abraham, he does entertain the possibility that the antediluvian prophets – Noah and, before him, Enoch, who is described as a prophet in Jude 1:14, – could have written down their knowledge. Still, he acknowledges that this has to remain a speculation:

*Quorum scripta ut apud Iudaeos et apud nos in auctoritate non essent, nimia fecit antiquitas, propter quam uidebantur habenda esse suspecta, ne proferrentur falsa pro ueris (De civ. XVIII.38; CCSL 48: 633.7–9).*

[But the excessive antiquity of the writings of those men has had the effect of preventing their acceptance, either by the Jews or by us, as authoritative; on account of their remoteness in time it seemed advisable to hold them suspect, for fear of advancing false claims to authenticity (trans. Bettenson 1972: 812)].<sup>61</sup>

Isidore seems to invoke this Augustinian position when in *Chronica maiora* he says that Enoch *nonnulla scripsisse fertur, sed ob antiquitatem suspectae fidei a patribus refutata sunt* 'is reported to have written a few things but they are refuted by fathers on account of their antiquity as [being] of suspect faith' (Isid. *Chron.* 9; *MGH AA* 11:

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<sup>59</sup> Although its full text has only survived in Ethiopic, the Book of Jubilees was well known among Christian authors before Isidore (Charles 1913: 2). Its connection to the invention-narrative in medieval texts was proposed by Fritz (2004: 135 n. 36). The difficulty is that, although our pool of available sources seems to point to Irish circles as the origin of the extended account of the history of writing, there is, to my knowledge, no other evidence that Irish scholars were directly familiar with the Book of Jubilees (cf. Watson 2018: 91 n. 350).

<sup>60</sup> *Quid autem sapientiae potuit esse in Aegypto, antequam eis Isis [...] litteras trederet?* 'Then again, what degree of wisdom could exist in Egypt before the art of letters had been bestowed by Isis?' (*De civ.* XVIII.37; *CCSL* 48: 633.40–2; trans. Bettenson 1972: 812).

<sup>61</sup> While Augustine doubts the survival of Enoch's and Noah's own writings, he still maintains that Hebrew was spoken and written since the time of the patriarchs (*De civ.* XVIII.39; *CCSL* 48: 634.37–9; trans. Bettenson 1972: 813–14). On Augustine's views on the history of writing, see Denecker (2017: 358–60).



427). Despite Augustine's and Isidore's caution, medieval grammarians wholeheartedly embraced Enoch as the pioneer of writing, likewise citing the Epistle of Jude as justification. So, for example, Clemens Scottus writes, using some of Isidore's phrasing:

*Δ: Quis primus litteras ante diluuium inuenit? M: Enoch uidelicet. Hic enim ante diluuium nonnulla scripsisse fertur per easdem litteras, quas ipse inuenit et quibus textum prophetiae suae illis temporibus ostendit testante Iuda apostolo in epistula sua: Prophetavit autem, ait, Septimus ab Adam Enoch dicens 'Ecce dominus ueniet' et cetera (Clem. 90.14–19).<sup>62</sup>*

[Δ: Who was the first to invent letters before the Flood? M: Clearly, Enoch. For he is reported to have written a few things before the Flood in the same letters which he himself invented and in which he revealed the text of his prophecy in those times, as is attested by the apostle Jude in his epistle: Enoch, the seventh from Adam, said he, prophesied, saying 'See, the Lord is coming' etc. (cf. Jude 1:14)].

Moreover, seven of our texts combine this motif with the story of two columns related by Josephus, who is frequently referenced in these accounts. The story, however, has evolved significantly in the Latin transmission of his 'Jewish Antiquities', as Jean-Marie Fritz (2004) has shown. Josephus' text focuses on the invention of astronomy by the 'good lineage' of Seth and how they, knowing of the imminent disaster, inscribed their discoveries on two pillars to prevent them 'from perishing before they became known' (*Ant. Iud.* I.70–1; LCL 242: 32–3). However, Fritz (2004, 133–4) pointed out that, starting from the eighth century, the Latin copies of the text shift emphasis from the Sethites to the doomed lineage of Cain. Josephus briefly mentions one of Cain's descendants, Jubal, son of Lamech, as the inventor of music. In the evolving Latin tradition, Jubal and his invention are inconspicuously placed after the invention of astronomy by the Sethites and before the legend of the two pillars (Fritz 2004: 133). This juxtaposition apparently inspired medieval authors to directly associate Jubal with the writing on the pillars. This is, for instance, the case in Rabanus Maurus' commentary on Genesis written ca. 822 (*PL* 107: 508C–D; cf. Fritz 2004: 134 n. 29). An even earlier example of this newly forged (but inauthentic to Josephus' text) connection is implemented in *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum*, one of the earliest surviving Hiberno-Latin grammars,

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<sup>62</sup> Importantly, Roisin McLaughlin (2009: 11 n. 22) also pointed out that Enoch's status as 'the first man of letters' (*cétna-litterda*) is acknowledged in the Irish *Sex aetates mundi*. The passage she cites is as follows: *Enóch mac Iaréth, di clannaib Séth, is é cétna-litterda ro-buí riam* 'Enoch, son of Jared, of the race of Seth, he was the first ever man of letters' (*SAM* 13; ed. and trans. Ó Cróinín 1983: 69.15–16, 112).

although it appears in the context of the invention of all *artes*, not specifically of writing.<sup>63</sup>

A different version of the two pillars motif is related by Murethach and the author of *Ars Laureshamensis*.<sup>64</sup> Both authors associate their creation with Cham, the son of Noah. This brings yet another source into consideration: John Cassian's *Conlationes*. Cassian's account casts the invention of writing in a decidedly negative light as, according to him, it was out of a desire to preserve sacrilegious and profane knowledge that Cham created writing (Cassian, *Conl.* VIII.21; Fritz 2004: 130; Treffort 2013: 48–9). Like Cassian, Murethach and *Ars Laureshamensis* credit Cham with the creation of the two pillars but entirely dispose of Cassian's negative evaluation of this act. For them, letters help preserve the knowledge of the liberal arts, *ut post peractum diluuium stoliditas hominum earum studio pelleretur et acumen ingenii exerceretur* 'so that after the deluge had passed, the stupidity of people might be driven out by studying them, and the sharpness of intelligence might be exercised' (*Laur.* 150.66–8; cf. *Mur.* 9.57–60). Evidently, at some stage a leap was made from astronomy and music which were the only two *artes* named by Josephus to an unspecified collection of liberal arts which, despite Cassian's distrust of secular knowledge, were now deemed essential. Besides, it would not behove a grammarian to speak ill of writing since *littera*, as the author of **G** puts it, is *fundamentum sapientiae* 'the foundation of wisdom' (p. 67.16)

Cham is present in almost all of our texts as one of the inventors of letters. The only one that omits his name is **R**. However, apart from Murethach, *Ars Laureshamensis* and Remigius, none of them connect Cham to the creation of the two pillars. Rather it is said that he simply *invenit* 'invented' letters after the Flood (**G** p. 69.13–14) or rediscovered them with the help of the stone pillar which survived the deluge (**DO** 9.28).

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<sup>63</sup> *Sed sciendum est omnes artes et omnes linguas et omnes scientias primitus fuisse ac diuinitus in Adam, qui spiritum sapientiae habuisse scribitur [...]. Sed postea, sicut suum multiplicatum est genus, ita et artes; sicut et ante diluuium Iubal ex genere Cain musicam artem repperit, cuius etiam frater Tubalcain ferri aeris que inuentor fuit, et scripturae columpnarum ambarum tunc repertae sunt* 'But it should be known that all *artes*, all languages and all sciences were originally, and by divine inspiration, in Adam who is said to have possessed the spirit of knowledge [...]. But afterwards, just as his lineage multiplied, so did the *artes*; and so before the Flood, Jubal from the lineage of Cain invented the art of music, and his brother Tubalcain was the inventor of iron and bronze; and the writings of both columns were discovered at that time (*Ad Cuimn.* I.42–9).

<sup>64</sup> The same motif is also found in Remigius' commentary on Donatus which further proves his dependence on Hiberno-Latin tradition. See *AH* 221.21–5.

Having reached Abraham and Moses, the history of the alphabets largely conforms to the Isidorean blueprint.<sup>65</sup> One significant addition that we find in two groups of texts (DO–Clem. and F–D–G) is Ezra who is said to have revised the Hebrew alphabet after the Babylonian captivity so that those became the letters that *nunc utuntur Hebrei* ‘the Hebrews use now’ (DO 10.42; Clem. 92.10). Donatus Ortigraphus points to Jerome as the source of this new information. The corresponding passage is found in Jerome’s preface to the books of Kings and Samuel known as *Prologus Galeatus* or the ‘Helmeted Preface’: *Certumque est Ezram scribam legisque doctorem post captam Hierosolymam et instaurationem temple sub Zorobabel alias litteras repperisse, quibus nunc utimur* ‘It is certain that Ezra, the scribe and the doctor of law, discovered other letters, which we use now, after Jerusalem had been captured and the Temple rebuilt under Zerubbabel’ (ed. Weber and Gryson 2007: 364.5–7). Donatus Ortigraphus and Clemens borrow Jerome’s passage almost verbatim while the three anonymous texts abridge it considerably.<sup>66</sup>

What are we to make of this complicated, multi-stage history of writing, and why was it seemingly so quintessential to so many texts dedicated to *littera*? I suggest that the answers to these questions lie in the innovations that these medieval narratives introduce to Isidore’s original account. Notably, Isidore starts his excursus into history of writing well after Babel, with Moses who wrote down the law through divine inspiration. The Hiberno-Latin grammarians and the anonymous *de littera* treatises unanimously extend the beginning of writing back into antediluvian times (Enoch) and ensure its continuity after the Flood with the story of the two pillars (Cham and/or Jubal). When it is finally Moses’ and Abraham’s turn to (re)invent the letters, they are already heirs to an extensive alphabetic legacy. Still, writing needs to be re-invented once more because there is another linguistic watershed event between the Flood and Moses: the Tower of Babel. Although its mention is tacitly omitted from all of our texts, its presence always looms large in Christian philosophy of language. Indeed, before Babel there was only one language, and it was commonly understood to have been Hebrew (Rubin 1998: 309–22; Eskhult 2014). Once invented, the alphabet for this original, pre-Babelic Hebrew

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<sup>65</sup> Though, curiously, Donatus Ortigraphus adds another inventor, a certain *Catacrismus* who is said to have been the third to invent Hebrew letters after Enoch and Cham (DO 10.33–4). This name seems to be a corruption of the word *cataclysmus* which Remigius uses to refer to the Flood (AH 221.22).

<sup>66</sup> See DO 10.39–42; Clem. 92.8–10; ed. Munzi (2007: 23.2 (F)); ed. Krotz and Gorman (2014: 337.15–16 (D)); G p. 69.18–19.

must have likewise been the same for all and only needed to be protected against the Flood. But after Babel, the newly instated multitude of languages required the creation of a multitude of alphabets, thus giving a graphic representation to the post-Babelic linguistic diversity. Glimpses of this process are evident in the invention of the Syriac, Chaldean and Hebrew alphabets.<sup>67</sup> The subsequent emergence of the Greek and Latin alphabet completes the triad of the sacred languages. Importantly, the narrative connects Hebrew to Greek (via Phoenicians) and Greek to Latin in such a way that the three alphabets essentially form a genealogical line or, as Cécile Treffort puts it, ‘a long chain of successive inventions, almost uninterrupted since antediluvian times’ (Treffort 2013: 51). Isidore, and Donatus Ortigraphus following him, demonstrate the continuity using letter A as example: from *aleph* to *alpha* to A, it was made to resemble the Hebrew original *ut nosse possimus linguam Hebraicam omnium linguarum ac litterarum esse matrem* ‘so that we may know that Hebrew is the mother of all languages and letters’ (*Etym.* I.iii.4; DO 9.14–15). To this Donatus Ortigraphus adds, following Augustine, that before the Hebrew language received its name from Eber, a descendent of Noah and ancestor of Abraham, to distinguish it from a host of other languages, it was simply called *humana lingua* since it was the language spoken by all (DO 10.29–32; cf. *De civ.* XVI.11; *CCSL* 48: 513.17–19). On the one hand, this designation emphasises linguistic unity before Babel but, on the other hand, the subtle indications that Greek and Latin alphabets are genetically connected to the Hebrew reinforce the status of the *tres linguae sacrae* as an all-encompassing linguistic system that covers the entirety of biblical knowledge, perhaps a new form of *humana lingua* for the Christian age.

Having established the Latin transmission of the invention narrative, it is now possible to bring the vernacular evidence into the discussion. *Auraicept na nÉces* presents a rather different story of the events. As is well known, *Auraicept*’s agenda as a vernacular grammar is ambitious: it aims ‘to raise Irish to the same level as the *tres linguae sacrae*’ (Russell 2005b: 406). According to the *Auraicept* tradition, Fénius Farsaid created Irish after the events that transpired at the Tower of Babel out of ‘what was best of every language and what was widest and finest’ (*a mba ferr*

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<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, despite being different languages and using different writing systems, the three were understood to be closely related. Isidore remarks, followed by Donatus Ortigraphus, that Syrian and Chaldean letters invented by Abraham *cum Hebraeis et numero et sono concordant, solis characteribus discrepant* ‘agree in the number of characters and in their sounds with the Hebrew letters and differ only in their shapes’ (*Etym.* I.iii.5, trans. Barney et al. 2006: 39; DO 10.37–8).

*íarum do cach bérlu 7 a mba leithiu 7 a mba caímu; Auraic. 1068*). But not only is the Irish language itself a marvellous achievement of linguistic design on Féníus' part, but his genius is also responsible for the creation of Ogam, in addition to the alphabets of the three sacred languages:

*Is e in fer cetna tra Fenius Farsaidh arainig inna ceithri aipgitri-sea .i. aipgitir Ebraidi 7 Grecca 7 Laitinda 7 in beithi-luis-nin in ogaim 7 is airi is certiu in dedenach .i. in beithe air is fo deoidh arricht.*

[Now Fenius Farsaidh is the same man that discovered these four alphabets, to wit, the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin alphabets, and the *Beithe Luis Nin* of the Ogham, and it is for this reason the last, to wit, the *Beithe* is more exact because it was discovered last (*Auraic. 1132–5*)].<sup>68</sup>

Here, the commentators disregard the entire tradition which presents the history of the alphabets as a series of inventions by prominent individuals in favour of Féníus who single-handedly created the alphabets of the *tres linguae sacrae* and later surpassed this already monumental achievement by inventing Ogam. It is only fitting that the best language would have the best alphabet to represent it in written form.

By overturning the pre-existing tradition in this way, the commentators not only show remarkable confidence in their own language but also propose a single source for all the alphabets perceived as significant. This is not just a case of continuous transmission and genetic ties between different alphabets but a claim that the four alphabets came from one and same mind and therefore share the closest connection possible. It is not clear whether the chronological principle, viz. Ogam is superior because it was invented last, also applies to Hebrew, Greek and Latin which would imply that the Hebrew alphabet is the lesser of the three.

As to where this vernacular account stands in relation to Hiberno-Latin texts discussed earlier, Roisin McLaughlin suggested that linguistically this passage can be dated to the early Middle Irish period, that is, it would have been added to the *Auraicept* at some point in the tenth century and is therefore only about a century younger than *Muretach* and *Ars Laureshamensis*. It appears that the author responsible for the passage was familiar with the catalogue of inventors in some form (either with Isidore's account or its extended version which circulated in Hiberno-Latin works) and consciously subverted it to serve the Irish-centred

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<sup>68</sup> On the origin myth of the Irish language, see Clarke (2013: 48–51).

agenda of the *Auraicept*. The author knew that the three sacred languages were at the core of the existing language-philosophical convention and transformed this knowledge into a new and original narrative.

Still, the radical re-imagining of the tradition did not prevent the readers from recognising traces of the original story. The Middle Irish commentary on the *Auraicept* known as *In Lebor Ollaman* sees right through the author's deception. It provides two lengthy passages which restore the original narrative, one being more detailed than the other. Here I present the second, longer version, as edited from Dublin, TCD, MS H 2.15 b (1317) by McLaughlin:

*Enoch tra in sechtmad fer ó Adamh ar-ranaic litri na nEbraide prius. Cam mac Nai iar ndilinn. Apraham dano ar-ranaic cairechtairi saine do litribh Asarda Callacdha et it inunda iar n-uimir 7 ese 7 litri na nEbraide. Maisi dono beos fuair litre na nEbraide arna scribend do laim De i Sleib Sina ic tidnacól rechta do Maisi. Estras immorro iar Maisi. Faenices cined do Grecaib fil for bru Mara Ruaid ar-ainic litri na nGrec archena. Cathmus mac Aigenoris tuc iat a Faenice. Carmentis nimpa ar-ranic litri Laitne. Fenius Farrsaid ar-ranaic bethe luis nion an Ogaim do reir senchaidechta na nGaidel.*

[Enoch, moreover, the seventh descendant from Adam, invented the letters of the Hebrews in the first instance. Ham son of Noah after the flood. It is Abraham, then, who discovered special characters for Assyrian and Chaldaean letters and they are identical to Hebrew letters with regard to number and nature. Moses, then, got the letters of the Hebrews after they had been written by the hand of God on Mount Sinai while bestowing the law on Moses. Estras, then, came after Moses. The Phoenicians, a Greek race on the shore of the Red Sea, invented the letters of the Greeks, moreover. Cadmus, son of Agenor, brought them from Phoenicia. Carmentis the nymph invented Latin letters. Fénius Farsaid invented the *beithe-luis-nin* of Ogam according to the tradition of the Gaels (ed. and trans. McLaughlin 2009: 9–10)].<sup>69</sup>

This brief account contains all essential elements of the extended invention narrative as found in Hiberno-Latin grammars and anonymous letter-tracts to which the author clearly had access at the time of writing (presumably tenth or eleventh century). The antediluvian figures of Noah and Cham are acknowledged as is Ezra, all of whom are absent from Isidore's account. There can be no doubt that *In Lebor Ollaman* is drawing on the same tradition as the ninth-century Hiberno-Latin texts.

Having thus rectified the 'incorrect text' (*míchorp*) of the *Auraicept* (McLaughlin 2009: 9), the author of *In Lebor Ollaman* adds Fénius' name at the end, crediting him

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<sup>69</sup> For the shorter account and comparison of the two, see McLaughlin (2009: 9–11).

with the invention of Ogam, but foregoes the remark on its superiority. With this, the invention narrative returns to its original form, and the Irish alphabet takes its place at the end of the chronological framework. It is worth pointing out that this configuration, with a vernacular alphabet appended to the standard list of inventors, occurs in two other texts. One of them is the already mentioned Donatus-commentary by Remigius who adds that the Gothic alphabet was created by Ulfilas (AH 221.36.7; cf. n. 48 above). Another such example is a rather curious work known as *De inventione litterarum ab Hebraea usque ad Theodiscam*, the earliest copy of which is preserved in St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 876, a grammatical compilation produced at St Gall ca. 800.<sup>70</sup> In its subject matter, *De inventione* is very close to the texts that we have been considering so far but it is distinct from what has been identified as the Hiberno-Latin version. The exposition starts with Moses (not with Enoch) and encompasses only the *tres linguae sacrae*, thus excluding Abraham. Instead it adds the so-called alphabet of Aethicus Ister, to which I shall return later, and *litteras quippe quibus utuntur Marcomanni, quos nos Nordmannos vocamus* ‘indeed, letters which the Marcomanni use, whom we also call the *Nordmanni*’ (PL 112: 1581). These letters of the *Nordmanni* are, indeed, runes. Importantly, all five alphabets whose origins are discussed in *De inventione* are written out in large capitals in-between regular lines of text. Based on the runic evidence, René Derolez (1954: 371–8) concluded that the text must have been produced in an English intellectual centre in Germany, possibly Fulda. This shows that, while Irish intellectuals were not the only ones with an interest in alphabets, the differences in form and content confirm that Hiberno-Latin texts tend to use a framework that is specific to them.

Although *In Lebor Ollaman* is one or two centuries younger than *De inventione* and Remigius’ work, it appears that there was a growing tendency in the early middle ages to recognise vernacular alphabets and to fit them into the framework of the

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<sup>70</sup> On the complex manuscript transmission of *De inventione*, see Derolez (1954: 279–345). Deborah Hayden (2016: 45–57) has proposed that *De inventione* may have influenced the alphabet lore preserved in the fourteenth-century ‘Book of Ádhamh Ó Cianáin’ (Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MSS G2, G3). She suggested two main points of similarity: one relating to the presentation of the alphabets, accompanied by letter names and numeric values, and another concerning the use of cryptographic techniques. It may be noted regarding the first point that representing the letter names as well as the numeric values of Greek and Latin letters was a rather common practice in Carolingian manuscripts and not unique to *De inventione*. However, a more recent study by Nicolai Engesland (2021a: 193–226) demonstrated that there might be a genetic connection between *Auraicept na nÉces* and one of the transmission branches of *De inventione*.

universal history of writing. With this, the continuity of writing, stretching from the antediluvian times, was made contemporary with the authors' own experiences.

## **The Symbolic Power of Letters**

### *Alphabet as a Symbol of Comprehensiveness*

As we have seen in the previous section, the initial purpose of creating the alphabet was to preserve scientific knowledge. Eventually, however, letters became valuable in their own right, acquiring symbolic power beyond their phonemic significance. The very idea of the alphabet often finds allegorical uses. Even in modern day, the phrase 'A to Z' conveys the idea of completeness, when a particular subject is covered from start to finish. Similarly, when God pronounces in Revelation *ego sum A et Ω* 'I am the Alpha and the Omega' (Rev 1:8, 21:6, 22:13), it is an expression of the divine absoluteness. The two Greek letters on their own became a powerful artistic symbol of the divine. So, for example, Benjamin Tilghman has pointed out that the incipit to the Gospel of Luke in the Book of Kells uses the Greek *omega* in place of the Latin *o* in the word *Quoniam* (Dublin, TCD MS 58, f. 188r). He further suggested that the outlines of an *alpha* could also be found within the lines of the same word by a reader who would meditate on and mentally manipulate the calligraphic elements (Tilghman 2011a: 297; 2011b: 101). Thus *alpha* and *omega* become intrinsically bound to each other as a unified symbol of beginning and end.

The Hebrew alphabet, having the honour of being the most ancient alphabet of the humankind, became the object of an important numerological trope among Christian writers. Starting from Origen, it became commonplace to associate the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet with the twenty-two canonical books of the Old Testament.<sup>71</sup> Irish scholars too were aware of this connection. It is acknowledged, for instance, in the Milan glosses.<sup>72</sup> Commenting on Jerome's preface to the Psalms where he mentions that the number of canonical books of the Old Testament is associated with some unspecified *mysterium*, the glossator adds: *.i.*

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<sup>71</sup> Although achieving the canon of twenty-two books required some artificial joining of texts. On the tradition of connecting the Hebrew alphabet with the canonical books, see Gallagher (2012: 85–98).

<sup>72</sup> The Milan corpus, preserved in Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, C 301 inf. (=Ml.) and dated to the first half of the ninth century, contains glosses on Theodore of Mopsuestia's commentary on the Psalms in a composite form: partly as a Latin translation of Theodore's Greek commentary made by Julian of Eclanum and partly a Latin epitome of the same commentary (McNamara 1973: 221–5; 2000: 43–9; Blom 2017: 91–4). The glosses are edited and translated by Stokes and Strachan (*Thes.* I: 7–483). However, here I follow the revised edition and translation by Griffith and Stifter (2007–13). The numbering of the glosses is identical in both editions.



*amal it dalebur fichet it di litir fichet dano 7 indi litir fichet hisin. indrún 7 indetercert. fil hisuidib ní bed (i)mmaircide frisannuiadnise* ‘i.e. as there are twenty-two books, there are twenty-two letters as well, and those twenty-two letters: the mystery and the interpretation which are in them (are) something that would have been suited to the New Testament’ (Ml. 2d2).<sup>73</sup> The glossator thus shows awareness of the trope and extends it to apply to the number of books in the New Testament.

The source of this knowledge was likely another one of Jerome’s prefaces, namely *Prologus Galeatus*, the preface to the Book of Kings:

*Quomodo igitur viginti duo elementa sunt, per quae scribimus hebraice omne quod loquimur, et eorum initiis vox humana comprehenditur, ita viginti duo volumina supputantur, quibus quasi litteris et exordiis, in Dei doctrina, tenera adhuc et lactans viri iusti eruditur infantia* (ed. Weber and Gryson 2007: 364.19–22).

[Just as there are twenty-two elements, by means of which we write down in Hebrew everything that we speak, and through the beginnings of which the human *vox* is comprehended, so twenty-two volumes are counted, through which, as if through letters and foundations, the delicate and still nursing infancy of a just man is educated in the teaching of God].

In this interpretation, the alphabet becomes an allegory for the Christian teaching. More specifically, as Tim Denecker (2017: 370–5) showed, the comprehensive nature of the alphabet played an important part in the moral interpretation of the so-called ‘abecedarian’ or alphabetic psalms, that is, those psalms where the verses are organised according to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Among these psalms are Psalm 118 as well as Psalms 110, 111, 112 and 144. The acrostic structure of these psalms was well known to Christian exegetes, again, since as early as Origen (Graves 2007: 50–1 n. 125) and is mentioned in Irish exegetical works dating from the eighth and early-ninth century.<sup>74</sup> Learning to read with the help of letters thus becomes an allegory for learning the moral ‘ABCs’ through the Psalms.

Psalm 118, also known as *Beati immaculati in via* or simply the *Beati*, stands out among other abecedarian psalms in that it is the longest one, with twenty-two groups of eight verses, each verse in each group starting with a particular Hebrew letter in alphabetical order. Importantly for us, the *Beati* enjoyed extraordinary

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<sup>73</sup> For the text of Jerome’s preface, see Weber and Gryson (2007: 768.12–15).

<sup>74</sup> Specifically, in the *Bibelwerk* and the ‘Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter’ (McNamara 1973: 270). For the relevant passage from the *Bibelwerk*, see McNamara (1973: 296); for the Old Irish treatise, see OIT 175–95.

popularity in medieval Ireland.<sup>75</sup> This is the introduction to the *Beati* found in the psalm-commentary from Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Pal. Lat. 68, dating to the early-eighth century and considered to be a joint product of the Irish and Northumbrian tradition (McNamara 1986: 72–4): *Totus hic salmus secundum ordinem literarum canitur et ita ab una litera VIII uersus et rursus a sequenti VIII alii compleantur et hoc similiter ad finem usque textitur* ‘This entire psalm is sung according to the order of the letters, and thus eight verses are completed [beginning] with one letter and again eight others with the following [letter], and it is woven in a similar way until the end’ (ed. McNamara 1986: 245). Clearly, the significance of the psalm’s abecedarian structure was not lost on Irish scholars.

Moreover, several glossed psalters from medieval Ireland make use of this structure as an interpretative aid to fruitful results. This is the case in the so-called Psalter of St Caimín, dated on palaeographical grounds to the late-eleventh – early-twelfth century (Ó Néill 2007: 21). Its surviving fragment (Dublin, UCD, Franciscan MS A 1) consists only of portions of Psalm 118, with heavy glossing in Latin in Irish. Pádraig Ó Néill (2007: 25–7) has identified several distinct elements of this glossing apparatus, among which is what he termed *explanatio*. Each alphabetical section is prefaced with such an *explanatio* which ‘begins with a translation of the name of the Hebrew letter for the section that it introduces, followed by comments which attempt to apply the translated term to the verses of its section by means of allegorical interpretations’ (Ó Néill 2007: 25). Similar *explanationes* can also be found in the slightly older Southampton Psalter (Cambridge, St John’s College Library, MS C. 9), written in Ireland in the late-tenth or early-eleventh century. As the source for both texts Ó Néill suggested the Pseudo-Bedan *Explanationes in Psalmos*, a text which was known in Ireland at least since the first half of the ninth century.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> On the popularity and ‘exceptional salvific power’ that the *Beati* was understood to possess in medieval Ireland, see Boyle (2020: 90–1, 99–107). See also McNamara (2000: 357–8). Given their popularity and status, abecedarian psalms also became the model for Irish ecclesiastical poetry. The most famous examples of this are the hymns *Audite omnes amantes* recorded in the late-seventh century ‘Antiphony of Bangor’ (cf. Orchard 1993) and *Altus prosator* which was likely composed in Iona in the seventh century but which in medieval sources is attributed to St Columba (cf. Stevenson 1999). The prefaces to both hymns make a formulaic note of their abecedarian structure (*ord a(i)pgitrech* ‘the sequence of the alphabet’) and cite ‘the Hebrew custom’ (*mos Ebreus/Ebreorum*) as inspiration (ed. Bernard and Atkinson 1898: vol. 1, 6.124–5, 64.51).

<sup>76</sup> It is cited, with an attribution to Bede, in the ‘Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter’ (Ramsay 1912: 462–3; Ó Néill 2007: 25; 2012: lxxiv). Ó Néill (2012: lxxiv n. 200) also noted that the possibility of Bede’s authorship should not be discounted.

Let us look at the *explanatio* of the letter *beth* in the Southampton Psalter as an example:

*BETH* (.i. 'domus'). Exponit fidelis populus in sermonibus Domini quibus dilectionibus perfruatur, ostendens se Domini domum et receptaculum mandatorum eius, cuius misterium secunda litera continet (ed. Ó Néill 2012: 314.48–52).<sup>77</sup>

[The faithful people explain in the words of the Lord what pleasures they should enjoy, showing that they are the house of the Lord and the receptacle of his commandments. This is the mystery that the second letter contains].

In this manner, each *explanatio* is a short comment on the meaning of a given Hebrew letter. These meanings are essentially translations of the Hebrew letter-names as presented in Jerome's *Epistula XXX.5* (*CSEL* 54: 246; cf. Denecker 2017: 372–4). Indeed, medieval scholars were aware that *litterae Hebraeorum de nominibus rerum factae sunt* 'Hebrew letters were created from the names of things', as was pointed out by the author of one of the anonymous letter-tracts (*AH* liii; **B** f. 104r). Thus in the example above the translation of the name of the letter *beth* as 'house' is connected to the idea that the faithful are the house of God (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; Heb. 3:6).

The already mentioned psalm-commentary in Vatican Pal. Lat. 68 also contains a set of dedicated explanations for each of the alphabetic sections different from those found in the Southampton Psalter and the Psalter of St Caimín. So, for *beth* the Vatican commentary offers the following interpretation: *BETH domus interpretatur, quod conuenit huic capitulo ubi cor quasi domus sermones Dei custodire dicitur* 'Beth is interpreted as "house", which is appropriate for this chapter where the heart is said to preserve the words of God as if it were a house' (Ps. 118:8; ed. McNamara 1986: 246). Unlike the more abstract *explanatio* in the Southampton Psalter and the Psalter of St Caimín, this interpretation creates a link with the text of the psalm itself, in this case, Ps. 118:11: *in corde meo abscondi eloquia tua* 'I have concealed your words in my heart' (trans. modified). The author identified the metaphorical image of the heart as a place for safekeeping something valuable (e.g. the divine word) and suggested that the same can be said of a house, thus weaving

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<sup>77</sup> The version in the Psalter of St Caimín is almost identical: *Beth domus. Exponit populus fidelis in sermonibus domum quibus delectationibus perfruatur ostendens se esse domum domini 7 receptaculum mandatorum eius cuius misterium secunda littera continent* (Dublin, UCD, Franciscan MS A 1, p. 2).

Hieronymian interpretation of the Hebrew letter into the subject matter of the main text of the psalm.

The notion of the alphabet as a metaphor for comprehensive knowledge, specifically the knowledge of Christian morals was also utilised outside of Psalter exegesis. A pertinent example of this is the title of the vernacular treatise *Apgitir Chrábaid* ‘The Alphabet of Piety’. The text is a guide to Christian ethics and describes ‘the ideal state of Christian conduct and the rewards that ensue therefrom by means of a ‘catechetical method of instruction’ (Hull 1968: 44). Therefore, the title *Apgitir Chrábaid*, which is attested in five manuscript copies, is entirely justified.<sup>78</sup> Alphabet as the foundation of learning is likened to morality as the foundation of good life.

The phrase *abgitir crabaith* is also attested in the Würzburg glosses, commenting on a verse from the Epistle to the Hebrews:<sup>79</sup>

*Etenim cum deberetis magistri esse propter tempus rursum indigetis ut vos doceamini quae sint elementa exordii sermonum Dei.*

[For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God (Heb 5:12)].

[gl. *Dei*]: .i. *initium fidei abgitir crabaith et fidei .i. ruda documenta fidei .i. ataid inhiris.*

[the beginning of faith, the alphabet of piety and faith i.e. primary lessons of faith i.e. ye are in faith (Wb. 33c13)].

Here, the word *abgitir* ‘alphabet’ is explicitly linked with the word *initium* ‘beginning’, it essentially becomes a figurative way of referring to the fundamentals of a particular area of knowledge.<sup>80</sup> That this was a common usage of the term *apgitir* in the vernacular is confirmed by one of the etymologies of the word provided in the *Auraicept* which derives it from Latin *abecedarium .i. tinnscedul* ‘i.e. the beginning’ (*Auraic.* 350–1).<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Out of total eighteen copies, though several of them are only fragmentary. See Hull (1968: 45–49).

<sup>79</sup> The Würzburg corpus, surviving in Würzburg, Universitätsbibliothek, M. p. th. f. 12 (=Wb.), is a collection of Old Irish and Latin glosses on the Pauline epistles of which Latin glosses have never been edited. The Würzburg corpus is dated to ca. 750 and is the most homogenous of the three major Old Irish gloss corpora. Most of the glosses were an effort of a single author and the majority of them was copied into the Würzburg manuscript by one scribe. The manuscript was likely written in Ireland and brought to Würzburg by the Irish scholar Clemens Scottus (cf. Breen 1996: 9–12; Ó Néill 2001). The Würzburg glosses are cited according to the gloss numbers in *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* (*Thes.* I: 499–712). A digital is also available (Doyle 2018).

<sup>80</sup> For other examples of such figurative usage, see *eDIL*, s.v. *aibgitir*.

<sup>81</sup> On the usage of the Hiberno-Latin form *abgitorium* as a link between Latin *abecedarium* and vernacular *apgitir*, see Ó Cuív (1980: 103–4).

Interestingly, in the *Auraicept*, the term *apgitir* seems to have initially been applied in reference to the Latin alphabet as opposed to Ogam. The Ogam alphabet is usually referred to as *beithe-luis-nin*, a term that is composed of the names of the first, second and fifth elements in the first group of characters (Ó Cuív 1980: 101; *Auraic.* 312–13; 392–3). Given the status of the Irish language in the *Auraicept*, where it rivals, and outright exceeds, the three sacred languages, it is not surprising that the Ogam alphabet is likewise praised for its extraordinary comprehensiveness: *cach son dona-airnecht cárechtair isna aipgitrib ailib olchena, ar-íchta cárechtairi leo-seom isin bethe-luis-nin ind oguim* ‘every sound for which a sign had not been found in the other alphabets besides, signs were by them invented in the B-L-N of the Ogam’ (ed. Ahlqvist 1983: 48 (1.14); cf. *Auraic.* 1055–7). It should be noted that the basic Ogam alphabet consists of twenty characters which can hardly qualify as a comprehensive set of letters. The author’s claim, however, appears to be based on the fact that, including the *forfeda* ‘supplementary characters’, Ogam comprises twenty-five letters, that is, more than any of the *tres linguae sacrae* (the Greek alphabet is the most extensive, counting twenty-four letters). Of course, technically, the purpose *forfeda* was ‘to accommodate letters of the Latin and Greek alphabets not already matched by Ogam characters’ (McManus 1991: 2) which, in a way, defeats the author’s argument. Nevertheless, it confirms that the notion of comprehensiveness was considered an important attribute of an alphabet in any language.

### *The Spirit of a Letter*

The previous section was dedicated to the idea of the alphabet as a whole and the figurative value of the alphabet as a symbol of comprehensiveness in exegetical writings. It is now fitting to turn to the questions concerning individual letters. The concept of a letter fascinated the minds of early medieval intellectuals. The Christian mindset brought with it a heightened sensitivity towards possible mystical readings of linguistic signs, including individual letters. Letters could be abstracted from their phonetic value and become allegorical symbols in their own right. As Benjamin Tilghman observed, letters, unlike representational art, have the power to act as ‘aniconic, conceptual models’ and to ‘embody extralinguistic meaning without any change to their form (Tilghman 2011a: 293). This idea is hinted at in the Old Irish apocryphal poem *Imbu macán cóic bliadnae* also known as ‘The Irish Gospel of Thomas’. It dates from ca. 700 and presents a vernacular reworking of the rich

apocryphal tradition of the ‘Infancy Gospel of Thomas’ which also survives in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic and Old Slavonic versions (Carney 1964: xix; McNamara 1971: 43–5). The Irish version consists of seven episodes from the infancy of Jesus, one of which involves him attending a school where he is taught the alphabet by a teacher named Zacharias. Jesus, however, refuses to repeat letters after him and instead pronounces: *ro-fetor a son* ‘I know their sound’ (GT 27; ed. and trans. Carney 1964: 98–9). After this,

*Do-rím Ísu a litre  
doäib ar a súil  
cech aí diib co n-a dúil  
ocus co n-a ruin.*

[Jesus recounted his letters for them before their eyes, each of them with its element and with its secret (GT 28; ed. and trans. Carney 1964: 98–9)].<sup>82</sup>

The text plays on the twofold view of letter: as a phonic entity (*dúil* ‘element’)<sup>83</sup> and as a mystical symbol (*rún*). Unfortunately, the text does not elaborate on the exact ‘mysteries’ that Jesus recited. Martin McNamara (1971: 57) did, however, suggest that in the original version of the tradition ‘Jesus’ mystical explanation of the letters of the alphabet was probably couched in unusual or in quite unintelligible terms’ and further proposed that this episode is a remnant of a ‘Gnostic-type tradition in which Jesus explains the secret meaning of the letters of the alphabet’. Despite its vagueness, the passage from the ‘Gospel of Thomas’ provides us with an early testimony to the idea that letters possess symbolic, mystical meaning.

Apart from possible Gnostic influences, an important source for the symbolic interpretation of letters is Isidore’s treatment of the ‘five mystical letters’ (*quinque mysticae litterae*) of the Greek alphabet: Y, Θ, T, A, Ω (*Etym.* I.iii.7–11). The last three are meaningful as Christian symbols: *alpha* and *omega* invoke the Book of Revelation (cf. p. 62) while T (*tau*) lends itself to be interpreted as a sign of the cross. The Greek Θ (*theta*), according to Isidore, signifies death, being the first letter in *θάνατος* ‘death’, *unde et habet per medium telum, id est mortis signum* ‘whence also it has a spear through the middle, that is, a sign of death’ (*Etym.* I.iii.8, trans. Barney et al. 2006: 40). The letter Y (*upsilon*) receives the most elaborate explanation:

<sup>82</sup> A more recent edition and translation is available by Herbert and McNamara (2001). However, for this stanza the new edition does not differ from Carney’s, except for a few orthographic adjustments. I also found Carney’s more literal translation preferable in this case.

<sup>83</sup> See also Sg. 3b7=3b14r where *dúil* glosses Latin *elementum*.

*Y litteram Pythagoras Samius ad exemplum vitae humanae primus formavit; cuius virgula subterior primam aetatem significat, incertam quippe et quae adhuc se nec vitiis nec virtutibus dedit. Bivium autem, quod superest, ab adolescentia incipit: cuius dextra pars ardua est, sed ad beatam vitam tendens: sinistra faciliior, sed ad labem interitumque deducens (Etym. I.iii.7).*

[Pythagoras of Samos first formed the letter Y as a symbol of human life. Its lower stem signifies the first stage of life, an uncertain age indeed, which has not yet given itself to vices or to virtues. The branching into two, which is above, begins with adolescence: the right part of it is arduous, but leads toward a blessed life; the left is easier, but leads to death and destruction (trans. Barney et al. 2006: 40)].

Thus the very shape of the letter Y becomes a profoundly meaningful sign whose graphic shape guides the mind towards an interpretation that is abstracted from its phonetic value. This interpretation was reused by Donatus Ortigraphus (DO 11.62–7) and the author of St Gall 877 (p. 72.13–17).<sup>84</sup>

Another factor that likely contributed to the interest in the symbolic understanding of letters is the fondness of Insular scholars for *aenigmata*, riddles and other verbal puzzles (Tilghman 2011a: 300–3). The English side of the tradition is well-represented by the likes of Aldhelm, Alcuin and Boniface. Irish evidence is mostly anonymous but can be found in the so-called *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae* (cf. Bayless and Lapidge 1998: 3–12) as well as in two elaborate riddles in the manuscript containing the Milan glosses<sup>85</sup> and the fanciful metaphors of the *Hisperica famina* (Orchard 2000; Corrigan 2013–14).<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the core premise of the *aenigmata* is to encourage the reader to seek non-obvious, non-literal meanings for something seemingly trivial.

Prime evidence for the idea that letters themselves can become the subject of a riddle is the anonymous Hiberno-Latin poem known as *Versus cuiusdam Scotti de alphabeto*. David Howlett (2010: 150) dated the poem to around the middle of the seventh century and suggested that it might have been a source of inspiration for

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<sup>84</sup> Besides, a clear nod to this moralising interpretation of the letter Y is found in a tenth-century Middle Irish poem *Cinnus atá do thinnrem* addressed to a young student by the name of Máel Brigte on occasion of his coming of age. The poem gives Máel Brigte long and detailed advice on upholding virtues and avoiding vices in his commencing adult life. The second stanza puts him at a crossroads and asks which path he will choose: *In sét des nó in sét clé camm, / do réir litre in féillsaim thall [...]*? ‘Is it the right-hand path or is it the crooked left-hand path, according to the letter of the philosopher long ago [...]’ (ed. and trans. Breatnach 2008: 8–9).

<sup>85</sup> Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS C 301 inf, f. 1r. They are edited and translated by Stokes and Strachan (*Thes.* II: 291–2) and more recently in Ahlqvist (2018). A detailed study of their language and content is in preparation by David Stifter.

<sup>86</sup> On the textual links between *Hisperica famina*, *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae* and Old English literature, see Wright (1990).

Aldhelm's *Aenigmata*. He also described the author as 'an Irishman with a knowledge of four languages, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Irish' (Howlett 2010: 136). The poem consists of twenty-three stanzas, corresponding to the number of letters in the Latin alphabet. Each stanza is a learned riddle the solution to which is a letter, for example:

*Principium uocis ueterumque inuentio prima.  
Nomen habens Domini sum felix uoce Pelasga.  
Execrantis item dira interiectio dicor.*

[The Beginning of sound and the first invention of the ancients, having the name of the Lord, I am happy as a Pelasgian [*i.e.* Greek] word; similarly I am uttered as a dire interjection of one cursing (ed. and trans. Howlett 2010: 137, 140)].

If one follows the clues, it will become clear that the solution to the riddle is the letter A. Since it is the first letter of the Hebrew (*aleph*), Greek (*alpha*) and Latin alphabets, the author suggested that it was the first to be invented. In its Greek form, it is one of the names of God, for he is *alpha* and *omega*. The word *Pelasga* 'Pelasgian', a fanciful synonym for 'Greek', heightens the register by giving the work a classical flavour and is also reminiscent of the lavish and ornate Hisperic Latin.<sup>87</sup> In this fashion, the poet goes through the entire Latin alphabet, weaving together learned allusions from grammatical theory, exegetical tropes, computus (by taking into account the numerical value of letters; cf. Howlett 2010: 147–8), and balancing the knowledge of multiple alphabets while doing so. His poem is a treasure trove of alphabet lore, and it showcases the many different perspectives from which a letter could be considered.

The discussion of linguistic puzzles in early Irish tradition would be incomplete without mentioning the legacy of one Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, an author as enigmatic as his own writings. His floruit has been reliably placed in the mid-seventh century but his origin has been contentious, with some scholars situating Virgilius in Spain, Gaul and Ireland and sometimes identifying him as Jewish (Herren 1979: 35–42; Law 1995: 2–3; Naismith 2008: 60–1).<sup>88</sup> However, the current consensus, based on compelling evidence provided by Michael Herren (1979; 1992; 1995) and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (1989), sees Virgilius as a part of Hiberno-Latin tradition. As for

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<sup>87</sup> On the language of *Hisperica famina*, see Herren (1974: 44–54).

<sup>88</sup> A rather persistent argument for Jewish origin has been proposed by Bernhard Bischoff (1988). For its critique, see Herren (1995).



the purpose and intent of Virgilius' oeuvre, the long-standing view of it as a grotesque parody of the pedantry of late antique grammarians (e.g. Lehmann 1922: 21–2) has been firmly replaced with an appreciation for his unconventional, flexible approach to the heuristic potential of language(s) and the place of grammar in the system of knowledge (Law 1995; Naismith 2008).

The *Epitomae*, one of Virgilius' two works, contains a chapter on the letter where he proposes the following comparison:

*Et ut aliquid intimatius aperiam, littera mihi uidetur humanae condicionis esse similis: sicut enim homo plasto et affla et quodam caelesti igne consistit, ita et littera suo corpore (hoc est figura, arte ac dictione uelut quisdam conpagibus, arcubusque) suffunta est, animam habens in sensu, spiridonem in superiori contemplatione (Virg. Epit. II.21–7)*

[To go into the matter more closely, it seems to me that the *littera* is similar to the human condition: just as man consists of a physical portion, a soul, and a sort of celestial fire, so too the letter is permeated with its body – that is, its shape, its function and its pronunciation, which are its joints and limbs, as it were – and has its soul in its meaning and its spirit in its higher form of contemplation (trans. Law 1995: 68)].

This is a complex passage that juxtaposes grammatical and exegetical concepts.<sup>89</sup> *Littera* is described as comprising three parts, like a human: body, soul and spirit. This tripartite anthropology is unmistakably Pauline (1 Thes. 5:23; cf. Heb. 4:12) and common among the Latin Fathers, reiterated, among others, by Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine and transmitted to the middle ages by Isidore.<sup>90</sup> However, Vivien Law (1995: 69) hinted at a different source, namely that Virgilius here relies on Eucherius of Lérins' (d. 449) *Formulae spiritalis intelligentiae* where he proposed a threefold schema of exegesis and compared it to the tripartite composition of man:

*Corpus ergo scripturae sacrae, sicut traditur, in littera est, anima in morali sensu, qui tropicus dicitur, spiritus in superiore intellectu, qui anagoge appellatur (Eucher. Formulae, Praef.; CSEL 31 4.16–19).*

[Thus the body of the sacred Scripture is, as they say, in the letter, the soul in the moral sense, which is called tropological, the spirit in a higher understanding which is called anagoge].

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<sup>89</sup> Vivien Law (1995: 68) suggested that what Virgilius describes as the *figura, ars* and *dictio* of a letter ('shape, function and pronunciation', in Law's translation) can be equated to the triad of *nomen, figura, potestas* – the standard attributes of a letter in late antique grammar, as listed by Donatus (*GL* IV 368.14–15). *Nomen* 'name' of the letter was more relevant in Greek (where, for instance, the name *alpha* does not directly correspond to the sound /a/) but less so in Latin grammar. *Figura* refers to the graphic shape of a letter and the term *potestas* 'force' signified the phonemic value represented by a letter.

<sup>90</sup> For references, see de Lubac (1998–2009: vol. 1, 139–40, n. 39–40).

Virgilius' phrasing, though different, is reminiscent of Eucherius': the level of *anima* is described as *sensus* and *moralis sensus* respectively, and Virgilius' highest level – *superior contemplatio* – is similar to Eucherius' *superior intellectus*. If Virgilius does indeed depend on Eucherius for his tripartite schema, it would then follow that alongside the explicit comparison between *littera* and the composition of man there is an implicit suggestion that, just like Scripture, a single letter possesses multiple levels of signification. An example of what might be implied under the moral sense of letters has been considered in the previous section. As for *superior contemplatio*, Françoise Desbordes (1985: 37) proposed that this is the level where human mind is given *accès à l'intelligence de l'ordre divin* 'access to the understanding of the divine order'. There is a sense of an ascending hierarchy of meanings culminating in contemplation of heavenly realities. Virgilius thus provides us with perhaps the most straightforward statement concerning the complex signification of letters beyond the spoken sounds that they represent on the most basic level.

On two occasions, Virgilius, a firm believer in the value of the *tres linguae sacrae*, demonstrates his knowledge of Jerome's translation of some of the Hebrew letter names. The first instance is found in his definition of the Latin word *res* in the context of the grammatical definition of the noun which, according to Donatus, signifies *corpus aut rem* 'a body or a concept' (*GL IV 2–3*):<sup>91</sup>

*De re autem et corpore multi haesitant. Res Hebraea littera est, quae interpretatur 'caput'; res ergo hoc est quid et primum nomen; sicut enim a primario quolibet ducatur exercitus inferior, ita et a capite corpus omne regitur* (Virg. *Epit.* V.32–6).

[Many people are doubtful about *res* and *corpus*. *Res* is a Hebrew letter the name of which means 'head', so is equivalent to a primary noun. Just as the army is subordinate to its head, in the same way the body is entirely governed by its head (trans. Law 1995: 67)].

This is yet another example of the way in which Virgilius seamlessly intertwines grammatical and exegetical knowledge. The reference to the Hebrew letter *res* and its translation as *caput* undoubtedly stem from Hieronymian tradition of *Epistula XXX.5* (*CSEL* 54: 246.10–11). But Virgilius repurposes this information to modify Donatus' definition of the noun as *corpus aut rem proprie cummuniterve significans*

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<sup>91</sup> On the innovative character of Donatus' definition of the noun and how, in its context, *res* started to be interpreted as an 'abstract concept', as opposed to the tangible *corpus* 'body', see Grondeux (2007). On the problems of (in)corporeality of nouns and their referents in Insular grammar, see Lockett (2011: 229–55).

'signifying a body or a concept as a proper or a common name' (*GL* IV 2–3). He appears to introduce a hierarchy of nouns whereby those with incorporeal referents preside over those with corporeal ones. This is achieved by incorporating alphabet lore into standard grammatical doctrines.

The second example of Virgilius' reliance on Jerome occurs when he gives examples of words used in each of the twelve varieties of Latin – one of the more extravagant parts of his teaching. The first Latin is the common language used by all. Each variety from the second to the twelfth represents a different way to disguise the usage of the first, standard Latin, be it by substituting single letters or entire words for different ones, using completely new words instead of existing ones, having one word signify a variety of things or many different words denoting one thing etc. The fifth variety – *Metrofia* – is described as *intellectualis* 'pertaining to the intellect' (Virg. *Epit.* XII.42–3). Virgilius then lists twenty-one words that belong to this type of Latin, for instance: *sade, id est iustitia, gcno, hoc est utilitas, bora, hoc est fortitudo, teer, hoc est dualitas coniugalis, rfofph, hoc est ueneratio* 'sade, i.e. "justice"; *gcno*, i.e. "usefulness"; *bora*, i.e. "strength"; *teer*, i.e. "conjugal duality"; *rfofph*, i.e. "reverence"' (Virg. *Epit.* XII.44–6) etc. As can be seen from this selection, these 'words' take on more or less fanciful orthographic forms, and some of them may be heavily mutated versions of existing words, as Vivien Law (1995: 89–90) suggested (for example, *bora* might be inspired by Latin *robur* 'strength'). The word *sade* 'justice' can be traced back to Jerome's interpretation of Hebrew letter names where *sade* is indeed translated as *iustitia* (*CSEL* 54: 246.10). This leads Law to further propose that *Metrofia* is based on such a 'glossed' Hebrew alphabet where the name of every letter is interpreted as a commonly used word. This is a plausible suggestion, even if Virgilius' list stops just shy of twenty-two words – the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

Another viable parallel to Virgilius' exercise is the alphabet of Aethicus Ister. The author who went by this name, and his work *Cosmographia*, are even more mysterious in terms of their origin than Virgilius himself. The *Cosmographia* is presented to its readers as a work which was written by a Scythian or Istrian scholar named Aethicus and translated into Latin by a certain *Hieronimus presbyter* who is clearly meant to be St Jerome himself. Due to the stylistic features of *Cosmographia* (e.g. the use of Greek vocabulary) and the penchant for language games and puzzles, it has often been considered in conjunction with Virgilius' works (cf. Shanzer 2006:

59–60). Michael Herren (1994) has shown that Virgilius used *Cosmographia* as one of his sources, rather than the other way around, and dated the text to between ca. 636–658. As for the text’s geographic origin, the question remains open. While the author was familiar with the Hiberno-Latin text *De mirabilibus sanctae scripturae*, this evidence does not conclusively place him within an Irish milieu (Shanzer 2006: 60–1).<sup>92</sup>

*Cosmographia* showcases Aethicus’ interest in puzzles, riddles and other sorts of linguistic manipulation, all of which are also Virgilius’ bread and butter. As a result of these experimentations, Aethicus devised a new alphabet which gained certain popularity in the early middle ages: it is copied among ‘real’ alphabets in **F** (f. 1 av) and in *De inventione litterarum* from St Gall, Cod. 876 (pp. 278–9; *PL* 112: 1579–80). Michael Herren (2001: 189–90) described it as follows:

The order of the alphabet is basically the Roman, with the omission of *r* and the addition of a letter corresponding to Greek *chi*. The forms of the letters are, to some extent, drawn from the Roman and Greek alphabets, while the names – *alamon*, *becah*, *cathu*, *delfou*, *effothu*, *fomethu* ... etc. – derive their elements from Latin, Greek (e.g. *delfou*), and Hebrew (e.g. *malathî*).

The morphology of these made-up letter names as well as the general idea behind the alphabet do seem somewhat reminiscent of Virgilius’ *Latinitas Metrofia*. It is possible that, like *Metrofia*, Aethicus’ alphabet was modelled on Jerome’s annotated Hebrew alphabet from *Epistula XXX*.

While certain fragments from Virgilius’ teachings found currency in grammatical treatises from the eighth and ninth centuries, his overall approach to grammar did not set a trend.<sup>93</sup> He had but one faithful follower and heir to his style of thinking. Like his intellectual predecessors Virgilius and Aethicus, the identity of this scholar is shrouded in mystery. His name is recorded sometimes as Sergilius and sometimes as Sergius. In the case of the former, it is tempting to assume that it was created by analogy with ‘Virgilius’ whom the author explicitly names as his teacher.<sup>94</sup> This

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<sup>92</sup> For a critique of the theory of Aethicus’ Irish background, see Tristram (1982: 164–5).

<sup>93</sup> On Virgilian interpolations in Irish works, see Ó Cróinín (1989), Bracken (2002), on the English reception, see Law (1982: 49–52).

<sup>94</sup> The author refers to himself as a philosopher and a disciple *Virgilii, filius Ramuth qui grammaticus fuit philosophiae* ‘of Virgilius, son of Ramuth, who was a grammarian of philosophy’ (Serg. 1.10–11). Another interesting explanation proposed by Marshall (2010: 171) is that the name Sergilius is a witty moniker created by combining the Latin and Irish words for ‘servant’: *servilis* and *gilla*. Alternatively, ‘Sergilius’ could have been a corruption of ‘Sergius’, if the author wished to style himself as the Roman grammarian of that name. To a medieval audience Sergius was known as the author of the treatise titled *De littera, de syllaba, de pedibus, de accentibus, de distinctione* (*GL* IV 475–

claim together with obvious stylistic similarities to Virgilius allowed Richard Marshall to place his floruit in the second half of the seventh century. Moreover, Sergilius' use of 'Hisperic' vocabulary seems to suggest an Irish origin (Herren 1984: 206; 1992: 144; Russell 2000b; Marshall 2010: 176–80; Munzi 2013–14: 64–72). According to Marshall (2010: 180–4), he could have been active in Ireland, perhaps closely linked to Virgilius and the authors of the *Hisperica famina*, or, alternatively, in one of the Irish monastic centres in Bavaria for which there is slight evidence of manuscript transmission.

Marshall views Sergilius' oeuvre as a singular work comprising three or possibly four sections and two sets of glosses. The only manuscript that preserves all of the elements is Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, BPL 135, ff. 71v–74v, written in North-Eastern France in the second quarter of the ninth century (=L).<sup>95</sup> The first three sections constitute a stylistic whole and expound a consistent doctrine concerning letters. It is safe to say that Sergilius brings his teacher's interest in this topic to a new level of theoretical sophistication. The clear focus on the graphic properties of the letters, divorced from any phonetic associations is, according to Marshall (2010: 169), 'an original contribution to early medieval education, and marks a radical subversion of previous statements concerning this most fundamental of Latin linguistic concepts'.

The first section serves as an introduction to the subject matter of the two that follow. Here, Sergilius presents a whole set of original vocabulary for describing letters as graphic symbols. The text is challenging for modern and medieval readers alike. Sergilius' exotic new terminology would have been near inscrutable, if not for the accompanying glosses. This is somewhat of a programmatic statement for his work:

*Incipiunt uocabula nugarum nungularum et notarum materiae bitheriarum  
silarum trilarum Serg[il]ii philosophi discipuli Virgilio, filius Ramuth qui  
grammaticus fuit philosophiae, qui docuit nos de nungulis nungisque et notis*

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85). On the mysterious identity of Sergius and confusion with Servius, see Kaster (1988: 429–30); Zetzel 2018: 319–24).

<sup>95</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 7533, f. 50r contains the first two sections. **B** preserves only the fourth section without attribution to Sergilius which is one of the indications that it is not an original part of Sergilius' work. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 6355, f. 261r contains additional glosses. See Marshall (2010: 167–8).

*ad faciendas betherias, de betheriis et ad uoces articulflas [...] et alia similia mirabilia his* (Serg. 1.9–14).<sup>96</sup>

[Here begin the names of the dots, strokes and marks, of the substance of the letters of the three alphabets of the philosopher Sergilius, disciple of Virgilius, son of Ramuth who was a grammarian of philosophy, who taught us about the strokes, dots and marks which constitute letters, about letters and articulated *voces* [...], and other such wonderful things (trans. Marshall 2010: 177; translation modified)].

Although the translation gives much of the intrigue away, this passage appears almost entirely cryptic at first: what are *nu(n)gae* and *nungulae, bitheriae/betheriae, silae trilae*? Some initial clarifications come from the glosses (indeed, anyone reading Sergilius' work for the first time needed them). *Bitheriae* appears to be the most straightforward of the terms. The glosses explain it as follows: *Bitheriae: idsunt litterae* (Serg. Ga3). This is one of the several formations that betray Sergilius' Irish background. Michael Herren (1992: 144; cf. Marshall 2010: 176) suggested that it is created from the Irish root *beith-* and Latin suffix *-aria*. We have already come across Irish *beith* as the name of the first letter in the Ogam alphabet – *beithe-luis-nin*. The word *bitheriae*, then, would mean 'letters of the alphabets', perhaps by analogy with Latin *abecedarium*. Incidentally, Sergilius also uses the Hiberno-Latin form of this word – *abictorium* (Serg. 2.10) – which is attested in other Irish and Hiberno-Latin works.<sup>97</sup>

The phrase *silarum trilarum* poses more of a problem. One of the glosses interprets it as *trium linguarum* (Serg. Gb4). Marshall, however, noted that if *silae* really meant 'languages' the main text would have used the term *lisinae* – another artefact of Hisperic style favoured by Sergilius.<sup>98</sup> Instead, he proposed the possibility of another intriguing connection to Ogam: in the *Auraicept*, Ogam letters are referred to not as *littera* but as *fid*, literally 'wood' (cf. *Auraic.* 399–400; 762). In light of this, *trilarum silarum* could be read as *trium silvarum* 'of the three woods' or, consequently, 'of the three alphabets' (Marshall 2010: 177). Then the three

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<sup>96</sup> References are to part and line number in Marshall's (2010) edition where the Sergilius' work is divided into four pars (1–4) and two sets of glosses (Ga and Gb).

<sup>97</sup> For instance, in *Auraicept na nÉces* (*Auraic.* 350) and in Tírechán's *Collectanea* (*Collect.* 6.1, 37.3, 47.2; ed. Bieler 1979: 126.33, 152.4, 160.13). Herren seems to suggest that the form *abictorium* is derived from Irish *apgitir* rather than directly from Latin *abecedarium* (Herren 1984: 206). However, Brian Ó Cuív (1980: 104) noted that 'a Hiberno-Latin form, such as *abgitorium* [...] is more likely to have been the immediate source of Irish *aibgitir* than the reverse (cf. n. 81).

<sup>98</sup> On the use of the word *lisina* 'language' in Hiberno-Latin literature and its possible derivation from Hebrew, Syriac or Chaldean, see Herren (1987: 120–1), Howlett (1997: 132–7).

alphabets in question would naturally be Latin, Greek and Hebrew, the triad that is central to the rest of Sergilius' work.

One other term that requires clarification from the passage cited above is *nu(n)ga* and its diminutive form *nungula*. The glosses interpret it variously as *apex* 'peak', *virga* 'branch, line' and *figura* 'shape' (Serg. Ga7; Gb2–3, 5). What appears to be meant by all of these is the stroke of a pen. As for the origin of the term *nuga* (or *nunga*), Marshall (2010: 179–80) suggested that Sergilius owes it to the Greek glossary known as Pseudo-Cyril which was known in Ireland already in the seventh century.<sup>99</sup> The supposed prototype of Sergilius' term might be the word *νυγμή* translated in the glossary as *punctum*. Another explanation was proposed by Luigi Munzi (2013: 65) who observed that a similar term *ungula* was used by Sedulius Scottus in the precise meaning of the 'stroke of a pen'.<sup>100</sup> Here, the link with Hiberno-Latin tradition still obtains, although Munzi (2013: 65 n. 48) added that the confusion between *ungula* could be a misspelling of *uirgula* which is easily explained as a simple scribal mistake when copying a group of minims.

In any case, Sergilius' novel terminology, with multiple synonyms for referring to the graphic elements of a letter, attests to his goal of studying writing *qua* writing. The connections to the vernacular vocabulary of the *Auraicept* are also intriguing, especially considering that its canonical core dates to the late-seventh century (cf. n. 43 above), i.e. is roughly contemporary with Sergilius. It is not impossible that they could share a common background in the study of grammar.

The second part of Sergilius' work, titled *Tractatio de materia litterae*, provides further insights into Sergilius' doctrine. Here we encounter yet another lexical innovation for 'letter' or 'character': *Palamatio quomodo uocatur in tribus linguis? Palpha in Hebraica, palda in Graeca, palamatio in Latina* 'What is a character (*palamatio*) called in the three languages? *Palpha* in Hebrew, *palda* in Greek, *palamatio* in Latin' (Serg. 2.2–3). *Palamatio* as a term for 'character' has a firm

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<sup>99</sup> One of the copies of the glossary is preserved in Laon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 444, a manuscript closely associated with Martinus Hibernensis. On Pseudo-Cyril, see Dionisotti (1988:10–15); on the circle of Martinus Hibernensis, see Contreni (1978: 95–134); on the contents that Pseudo-Cyril shares with early Irish glossaries, see Russell (2000a: 412–19).

<sup>100</sup> See Sed. *In min.* 5.44–6: *Γραμμὴ Graece, linea Latine interpretatur, ex quo nomine Graeco gamma, id est littera derivatur. Omnis enim littera ex lineis unguis que conficitur* 'The Greek *γραμμὴ* means 'line' in Latin, from which name the Greek *gamma*, i.e. 'letter', is derived. For every letter is composed of lines and strokes (*ungulis*'). Otherwise, the Latin word *ungula* does not have this meaning as it primarily denotes 'hoof, claw' or 'aromatic spice'.

grounding in Hisperic Latin. The verb *palare* ‘to reveal’ is attested three times in *Hisperica famina* and is consistently glossed with *revelare* (Marshall 2010: 178–9).<sup>101</sup> It was formed by discarding the prefix *pro-* of the existing Latin verb *propalare* of the same meaning which was likely influenced by the adverb *palam* ‘openly, manifestly’ (Herren 1974: 139). Sergilius’ nominal formation here is likewise based on the adverb (as are the ‘Hebrew’ and ‘Greek’ terms). What is important and innovative in this newly created word, is that it emphasises the representative function of a written character understood as a ‘revelation’ either of a sound with which it is associated or, as we shall see shortly, of a higher meaning.

Apart from this, the second section contains more or less standard grammatical material, viz. the classification of letters into vowels, semivowels and mutes and a very brief statement concerning the origin of writing. Since Sergilius pre-dates all of the versions of the invention-narrative discussed above, his account is radically different: the honour of inventing letters is ascribed to the god Mercury, an attribution which is not uncommon in late antique grammar.<sup>102</sup> In the same section Sergilius also demonstrates in practice that he was familiar with the writings of Virgilius. When he lists the three standard attributes of a letter – *nomen, figura, potestas* – he supplements them with a further triad of *anima, virtus et corpus*. These three are indeed reminiscent of Virgilius’ tripartite schema, where a letter consists of *corpus, anima* and *spiridon* interpreted as *superior contemplatio*. By replacing *spiridon* with the more familiar term *virtus* ‘virtue’, Sergilius lands closer to the tradition of metaphorically connecting the alphabet with the fundamentals of moral education which has been discussed above.

The third section dives even deeper into the topic of the graphic composition of letters. Here, Sergilius presents stroke-by-stroke breakdowns of each letter of the Latin alphabet and he does so in the three sacred languages. So, for instance, the first two letters are described thus:

*A. Tres uirgultae quomodo uocantur in tribus linguis? In Hebraica: abst, ebst, ubst. Quomodo in Greca? Albs, elbs, ulbs. Quomodo in Latina? Duae uirgae obliquae et una recta de super.*

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<sup>101</sup> It is also used in the so-called *Proverbia Grecorum*, a collection of maxims on such topics as wisdom, virtue, truth, etc. which appears to have been compiled in sixth-century Ireland, was transmitted to Bobbio by the end of the eighth century and copied by Sedulius Scottus in his *Collectaneum* (Simpson 1987: 1–10). For its use of *palare*, see Simpson (1987: 21).

<sup>102</sup> For an overview of the relevant sources, see Munzi (2013–14: 61–2). On Mercury as the inventor of letters, see Bremmer (1991).



B. *Hae notae in Hebraica: dabst, debst. In Greca: dalbs, delbs. In Latina: uirga semiobliqua et semicirculus, sed ex parte austri figura* (Serg. 3.2–6).

[A. What are the three lines called in the three languages? In Hebrew: *abst, ebst, ubst*. What [are they called] in Greek? *Albs, elbs, ulbs*. What [are they called] in Latin? Two slanting lines and a straight one from above.

B. These [two] marks in Hebrew: *dabst, debst*. In Greek: *dalbs, delbs*. In Latin: a partially slanting line and a semicircle, but on the figure's southern side. (trans. Marshall 2010: 201; translation modified)].

Sergilius' logic is quite clear: for Hebrew and Greek he invents groups of words with alternating vowels whereas in Latin he provides a geometric description of the pen strokes comprising a given letter.<sup>103</sup> Marshall (2010: 202) suggested that the Latin descriptions are a unique innovation in medieval grammar in that they provide 'a guide to writing as opposed to a mere description of shapes' by indicating movement of the pen and the order in which the constituent strokes should be executed.<sup>104</sup> He also proposed that the use of directions such as 'north' and 'south' for 'left' and 'right' might be influenced by the technical vocabulary for describing Ogam letters (Marshall 2010: 177, 203). The *Auraicept*, for example, uses *túath*- 'north, left' and *dess*- 'south, right' to describe consonantal characters written to the left or right of the central stem (cf. *Auriac.* 945–8, 985–7). Overall, such a form-oriented approach prepares the ground for viewing letters as primarily visual marks, the signifier without the signified, or rather, an empty receptacle which can be filled with different kinds of meaning. The visual nature of the letter together with its status as the smallest unit of language, an atom, allows it to become a tangible image of signification – form that awaits to be granted its sense.<sup>105</sup> It is, in this way, similar to Derrida's idea of writing as the purest image of the 'signitive essence of language' (Staten 1984: 61).

With this, the discussion has reached the supposed fourth section of Sergilius' treatise, where Latin letters receive Christianised allegorical meanings. Its

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<sup>103</sup> Regarding the bizarre Hebrew and Greek terms, Munzi (2013–14: 66–70) pointed out that, like Sergilius' other inventions, they are well within linguistic practices employed by Irish scholars. Invention of 'Hebrew' and 'Greek' words based on *giochi di rime e su elementari assonanze* 'play on rhymes and elementary assonances' was not uncommon among Irish exegetes. Examples of this can be found in *Liber de numeris* (McNally 1957: 128), the Irish *Sex aetates mundi* (SAM 10; ed. Ó Cróinín, 1983: 68) and, indeed, Virgilius Maro Grammaticus (Virg. *Epist.* VII.10–20; *Epit.* XII.36–42).

<sup>104</sup> But see Munzi's (2013–14: 65–6) critique of this idea and his characterisation of Sergilius' descriptions as *generiche e spesso poco perspicue* 'generic and often not very clear'.

<sup>105</sup> The comparison of letters to atoms appears to have been originated by the grammarian Sergius (GL IV 475.5–9) and was eagerly adapted by medieval grammarians (e.g. Clem. 82.10–20; Mur. 7.14–23; Sed. *In mai.* 6.17–20; *Laur.* 149.13–20; **G** pp. 68.9–69.7; ed. Krotz and Gorman 2014: 339.71–7 (D); ed. Munzi 2007: 24.4 (F)).

attribution to Sergilius appears organic at first, based on its manuscript context in **L** where it follows the previous section without so much as an incipit or even a line break (**L** f. 73r23). But apart from this positioning, there seems to be little else to connect this part to the rest of Sergilius' text. Marshall (2010: 167 n. 1) printed Section 4 as part of his edition based on the evidence of **L** but expressed his reservations. Munzi was likewise critical of attributing this text to Sergilius. He pointed out how incompatible its thoroughly Christian outlook is with Sergilius' apparent indifference towards the religious implications of the study of letters (Munzi 2013–14: 56).

Besides, this text enjoyed a rather robust independent circulation. Aside from **L**, it is found, in shorter or longer recensions, in five other manuscripts. Four of them are listed by Munzi (2013–14: 56):

1. (**B**) Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS 417 (region of Tours, s. ix<sup>1-2/3</sup>): *De litteris latinis quidam sapiens interpretatus est*, ff. 95v–98v (AH 302–5; ed. Munzi 2007: 101–4);
2. (**P**<sub>1</sub>) Paris, BN lat. 13025 (Corbie, s. ix<sup>in</sup>): *De litteris latinis quidam sapiens interpretatus est*, ff. 24v–25v (unedited);
3. (**P**<sub>2</sub>) Paris, BN lat. 1750 (Northern France, s. ix<sup>1/2</sup>): *De litteris excerptum*, ff. 140r–141r (unedited);
4. (**K**) Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Cod. Aug. perg. 112 (Reichenau, s. ix<sup>1/3</sup>): *A uocalis est*, ff. 3v–12v (ed. Munzi 2007: 123–38).

In addition to these, I have discovered the longest recension of this text in St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 230, pp. 549–63 (=G'; St Gall, ca. 800).<sup>106</sup> This version is the only one that has a general introduction to the topic of *littera* which consists of an almost verbatim copy of Donatus' chapter on the letter from his *Ars maior* and some material found in the anonymous letter-tracts discussed in the first half of this chapter.<sup>107</sup> The text in **G'** is, however, incomplete, only reaching the letter O. The recension found in **K** (another 'Germanic', or rather Alemannic, manuscript), is the

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<sup>106</sup> I first came across this text through Vivien Law's (2003: 117–9) discussion of a brief portion of it, although she only associated it with the text in **B** and did not comment on their differences.

<sup>107</sup> A portion of this introductory section also appears independently in London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero A II, ff. 33v–34v. The manuscript is composite but the part to which the text belongs was copied in Northern Italy in the late-eighth – early-ninth century from an Irish exemplar (Lowe 1934–71: vol. 2, 20 no. 186; Dorfbauer 2017: 126; Bischoff 1998–2017: vol. 2, 107 no. 2421). Moreover, Law (2003: 117) noted that the mention of the *tres linguae sacrae* in the introductory section, together with the use of the Hiberno-Latin term *glorificatio* 'manifestation', may point to an Irish origin for this text.

closest to **G'**, although its entries for each letter are still somewhat shorter. The four 'Frankish' codices transmit roughly the same material, with minor differences, and are considerably more concise than **G'** and **K**.

As for the content itself, this treatise elevates Sergilius' interest in letters as graphic marks to a whole new level. It approaches written shapes from a point of view that can be characterised as exegetical. Along with standard grammatical fare (classification into vowels and consonants, numerical value of letters), for each letter, except Y and Z, we are told how many pen strokes it comprises, and this information is then interpreted spiritually, turning letters into objects of thought (Law 2003: 118–19). Some of these interpretations are repeated for several letters. For example, A, E and M, with their three constituent strokes, represent the trinity while ten letters consisting of two strokes (B, D, F, G, H, N, P, Q, R, S) are understood as symbols of the two testaments. The letter X, as one may expect, is likened to a cross. Other letters receive original and more intricate interpretations. The remaining two-stroke letters, T and V, are interpreted as two pairs of oppositions: *corpus* and *anima* and *bonum verbum* and *malum verbum* respectively. For T, the explanation specifies that the vertical stroke represents the body as it is bound to earth while the horizontal stroke stands for the soul in its proximity to heaven. The connection between N and the two testaments is further expanded to signify *historia* and *sensus* of Scripture. Evidently envisaging a lower case N, the author compares the oblique stroke to *historia* and the upright stroke to the superior *sensus*. Similar implications of superiority associated with upright pen strokes and inferiority with oblique ones obtain for letters I, K and L. The letter I has *typus unius Dei, quia rectus est deus* 'the type of the one God, because God is (up)right' (AH 303.34 (**B**)). K is said to represent man, so in **B**: *Quae typum hominis ostendit cum duobus sensibus, quia malum sensum et bonum sensum figurat, quae scribitur uirga recta desuper et alia de medio eius deducitur* 'It demonstrates the type of man with two senses, because it represents bad sense and good sense: a straight line is written from above and another one is drawn out in its middle' (AH 304.4–6). The letter L stands for *typus legis Iudaeorum, quia obliqua est* 'the type of the law of the Jews because it is oblique' (ed. Munzi 2007: 127.11 (**K**); cf. **G'** p. 559.21). The remaining single-stroke letters are C and O. Of these, O is said to represent a *corona* 'crown'. The mystical meaning of C is rather cryptic: it is said to be a symbol of *ecclesia quae iuvatur a deo* 'the church which is helped by God' and it is given its interpretation *quia habet veritatem*

*arbitrii sui* 'because it has the truth of his judgement' (ed. Munzi 2007: 123.3 (**K**)). Munzi (2007: 107) suggested that the concave shape of C may have been understood as a welcoming embrace of the church which receives divine counsel.

In this manner, all letters (except Y and Z) receive mystical interpretation and thus become fully-fledged allegorical symbols in their own right, not as simply constituent elements of words. This treatment is a logical culmination to Sergilius' work of studying letters as independent entities to themselves and it is therefore not surprising that the compiler of **L** found it appropriate to attach this text to that of Sergilius. Given the focus of the work, it is likewise entirely fitting that the author of the introduction to the version found in **G'** saw a clear path that connects letter to the mind itself: *Littera quid est? Elimentum uocis articulati. Elimentum quid est? Conceptio sensus. Sensus quid est? Glorificatio cogitationis, qui explanatur per uocem* 'What is a letter? An element of the articulated *vox*. 'What is an element? An idea of meaning. What is meaning? Glorification of thought which is explained through *vox*' (**G'** 550.3–4). Here, letter, understood as both a phonemic and a graphic unit, represented the starting point of all meaning-bearing expression and a vehicle for externalising thought (*cogitatio*).

But if the treatise on the mystical meaning of letters does not belong to Sergilius, then what is the purpose of discussing it as a part of Irish tradition? This is because, as I will show presently, there are certain connections to be made to an Irish intellectual milieu. The Christian meanings of letters discussed above constitute the common core shared between all six copies of the text. However, as was mentioned above, the Alemannic manuscripts **G'** and **K** preserve considerably expanded versions of the same work.

Initial evidence for Irish connections of the long recension comes from the introductory matter in **G'**, as outlined in n. 107 above. But it is also instructive to consider the content shared between **G'** and **K**. The additional material in the Germanic manuscripts conforms to a defined structure: after a brief discussion of a letter's significance, which is common to all versions, there follows a collection of authoritative statements whose first word starts with that letter. This section usually begins with a few biblical maxims, taken mostly from the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Sirach. After that, assorted excerpts from the Church Fathers and other authorities follow. Initial source analysis for **K** has been conducted by Luigi

Munzi, its editor, while **G'** still awaits a detailed study, which I plan to undertake in the future. At the current stage, it is possible to say that by far the most important source for these quotations is Isidore's *Synonyma*. Below, I offer a few quotations given under the letter H in the St Gall manuscript (**G'**), together with references to their sources:

*Honora eum qui miseretur pauperi. Hominis est animam preparare et domini gubernare linguam* (**G'** 557.20–1; cf. Prov. 14:31, 16:1).

[Honour him who is kind to the poor. It is the part of man to prepare the soul, and of the Lord to govern the tongue].

*Humilitas casum nescit. Humilitas lapsum non nouit. Humilitas ruinam numquam incurrit. Humilitas numquam lapsum passa est* (**G'** 558.5–6; cf. Isid. Syn. II.22; PL 83: 850B).

[Humility does not know destruction. Humility does not recognise falling. Humility never meets ruin. Humility has never suffered a fall].

*Humilitatem tene ex Christo, deuotionem ex Petro, caritatem ex Iohanne, oboedientiam de Abraham, pacientiam de Isaac, tollerantia[m] de Iacob, castitatem de Ioseph, mansuetudinem de Moysen, benignitatem de Samuhel, constantiam de Iosuae, misericordiam de Dauid, abstinentiam de Danihel* (**G'** 558.11–14; cf. *Liber de numeris* 5; PL 83: 1296D–97A).<sup>108</sup>

[Attain humility through Christ, piety through Peter, love through John, obedience through Abraham, patience through Isaac, endurance through Jacob, purity through Joseph, clemency through Moses, kindness through Samuel, perseverance through Joshua, compassion through David, abstinence through Daniel].

These excerpts demonstrate how certain 'key words' starting with a particular letter become the centre of attention. Here, they are *honor* and *humilitas*, two virtuous qualities which hint at the purpose behind this florilegium: moral instruction. Taking the structure of the text into account, one also cannot help but be reminded of the abecedarian psalms. Even though the alphabetic quotations in **G'** and **K** are not arranged into stanzas and are not limited to a certain number per letter, these series of moralising *sententiae* arranged into alphabetic groups for meditative reading are definitely comparable to the *Beati*. Curiously, the entries for the letter B, while they do not include the first two verses of Psalm 118 (starting with *Beati immaculati* and *Beati qui scrutantur* respectively), make up for it with a long series of maxims starting with the words *Beatus qui*. In **G'**, they are correctly attributed to the fourth-century theologian Ephraim the Syrian (d. 373). The Latin translation of his sermon *De beatitudine animae* follows a rigid rhetorical structure, whereby a

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<sup>108</sup> These quotations can also be found, with minor differences, in **K** (ed. Munzi 2007: 125.8).

string of sentences starts with these exact words: *Beatus, qui...* This makes it prime source material for our text. Importantly, David Ganz (1999: 40–2) pointed out that one branch of the Latin transmission of Ephraim’s sermons was firmly rooted in southern Germany – in Bavaria and Alemannia – where they were likely brought by English missionaries. Ganz (1999: 42) also noted that Ephraim’s works are listed in the Carolingian catalogues of several south German monasteries, including St Gall. This may suggest that the longer recension of our text originated in this area, perhaps even at St Gall itself.

Another noteworthy source, and one that is used in the passage above, is the Pseudo-Isidorean *Liber de numeris*. As Robert McNally (1957: 154–6) has shown, this text on the mystical symbolism of numbers was likely written in the second half of the eighth century in the circle of Virgilius, the Irish bishop of Salzburg. A more recent analysis of the text by Carmen Cardelle de Hartmann (2012: 34–7) has yielded similar results: that *Liber de numeris* must have been written between 760–794 in Bavaria or Alemannia. It is perhaps not a coincidence that **K** (f. 48r, 50v) also contains excerpts from the long recension of *Liber de numeris*, namely the numerical lists of seven (e.g. the seven grades fulfilled by Christ, seven grades of wisdom etc) as well as six ages of the world.<sup>109</sup>

With these two sources – the Latin Ephraim and *Liber de numeris* – we find ourselves in a milieu which is almost certainly southern German with a legacy of Hiberno-Latin scholarship. It may therefore be suggested that the version of the core text as found in **G’** and **K** was not simply copied but created in this area. From here, it may have travelled to Francia where it was eventually abridged. One may also think of Marshall’s suggestion that Sergilius’ oeuvre has evidence of Bavarian transmission and, of course, that the short version of this text is copied as part of Sergilius’ work in **L**. It thus appears that the in-depth study of the extralinguistic significance of letters was considerably inspired by the intellectual exercises of Irish scholiasts.

### **Conclusion**

The evidence examined in this chapter is a testament to the overwhelming interest of early medieval scholars in letters and alphabets. While I have attempted to

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<sup>109</sup> These are absent from the edition of the short recension of *Liber de numeris* in *PL* 83: 1293–1302. The excerpt on the six ages of the world is edited in Tristram (1985: 297–8). On the recensions, see McNally (1957: 3–21); Smyth (1999: 292–3); Cardelle de Hartmann (2012: 16–20, 25–33).

highlight a broad range of better and lesser known sources, this survey does not cover the full extent of material relating to the topic of *littera*. Some conclusions can nevertheless be drawn.

The first section offered an overview of a group of interconnected narratives centred around the invention of alphabets. Among the texts that belong to this group are those that are known to belong to Irish tradition as well as a number of anonymous Latin letter-tracts which, as I argued, have some ties to it, although they may not necessarily have been written by Irish scholars. This assumption is supported by the fact that almost all text introduced in this section unanimously diverge from Isidore's authoritative account of invention and expand it in similar ways. The texts' conscious effort to extend the history of writing into antediluvian times and to showcase the almost genealogical lines of descent helps to rationalise and boost the reverence for the symbolic power of letters. Indeed, if the history of writing can be traced back to the times of the primeval language, then the very letters used by medieval scholars could be said to share in the deeper insight of that language.

These considerations give rise to the theme explored in the second section of the chapter, namely that letters are often understood to possess abstract symbolic meaning which lies beyond their primary function as signs of spoken sounds. This extralinguistic signification of letters was examined from two perspectives: the alphabet as a whole and individual letters. The very idea of the alphabet, i.e. a set of signs that covers all sounds produced by a language, is frequently used as a symbol of comprehensiveness or completeness and employed as a metaphor for mastering knowledge, especially moral knowledge, from start to finish. The mystical nature of the alphabet shines most clearly in the abecedarian psalms which open vast opportunities for exegetes to find allegorical connections between the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the content of the verses that begin with those letters.

Like Hebrew, Latin letters also became the object of extralinguistic analysis. The foundations for it were laid by Virgilius Maro Grammaticus who ingeniously likened letter to the human being, consisting of body, soul and spirit. In a letter, the three correspond to the graphic shape, phonetic value and symbolic meaning. The spirit of a letter is closely connected to its visual shape. Thus, to discover the former, one must meditate on the latter. Understanding letters as written shapes is the purpose of Segilius' work. He views *littera* not just as a phonetic symbol but as a visual sign

in its own right, which is evident from the abundant vocabulary that he invents for referring to letters and alphabets as well as from his detailed breakdown of the graphic composition of every Latin letter. This work prepares the ground for viewing letters as exegetical symbols. This is done in a group of anonymous treatises with ties to Irish circles in southern Germany. Here, letters not only receive allegorical interpretation but become the organising principle in a moral catechism which calls back to the structure of abecedarian psalms. A letter is thus understood as a microcosm of meaning, representing the very possibility of signification in a way that may be compared to Derrida's postmodern theory of writing.

Overall, in this gradual exploration of sound and letter, it becomes evident that these physical components of language, audible and visible, were understood to possess extensive conceptual dimensions where they engage with the mind on a level that exceeds simple sense-perception and lays the groundwork for the processing of more complex linguistic entities, one of which – the word – is the subject of the next chapter.



## Chapter 3: The Study of the Word

### *What is a Word?*

Modern linguistics has not yet succeeded in providing an all-encompassing definition of a word that would satisfy the specifics of all languages. A noteworthy, if rather broad, definition was proposed by V. M. Žirmunskij (1966: 66): ‘The word is the most concise unit of language, which is independent in meaning and form’. More recent scholars have focused on more specified criteria entailed by ‘meaning’ and ‘form’: morphological, syntactic, phonological, orthographical, lexical, semantic (Packard 2000: 7–14; Dixon and Aikhenvald 2003: 6–10). This chapter will build on these varied modern approaches to defining the word in order to explore medieval Irish theories regarding the same topic. It will start by considering indirect evidence of Irish scribal practices that allows us to estimate scribes’ and scholars’ awareness of the various aspects that constitute a word. The second part of the chapter will focus on Irish grammarians’ own reflections on the concept of ‘word’ by investigating specific vernacular terms that were used to denote it, including *epert*, *bríathar* and *focal*. Lastly, a case-study of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus’ terms for ‘word’ will be offered which will reveal curious contrasts and parallels to vernacular usage.

### *Grammatical, Phonological and Orthographic Words*

Several different branches of contemporary linguistics have developed specific criteria for classifying a linguistic unit as a word. **Morphological word**, for example, is understood as the product of word-formation rules (Packard 2000: 11–12; Hyman 2005: 157). The predominant understanding of the **syntactic word** is dictated by the X-bar theory where it is defined as a linguistic unit which can be placed into an  $X^0$  position within a phrase structure schema (Di Sciullo and Williams 1987: 78–9). When the boundaries of the morphological and syntactic word coincide, they may be jointly referred to as a **grammatical word** (Dixon and Aikhenvald 2003: 6). The notion of a **phonological word** refers to a prosodic constituent larger than a syllable but smaller than a phonological phrase. While it often aligns with morphological and syntactic boundaries, it is distinct from a grammatical word in that a single grammatical word may consist of two and more phonological words and the other way around (Hall 1999: 1–2). For speakers of analytic languages, such as English, the notion of an **orthographic word** may be the most intuitive approach as it simply

gives the status of a word to any segment of written speech between spaces or punctuation marks.

With this in mind, we can now turn to consider the presence and importance of these criteria in Irish intellectuals' approaches to the word. While Irish scholars themselves did not leave any reflections on the morphological and syntactic criteria of what constitutes a word, modern researchers have been able to make some observations in this regard based on medieval writing practices, i.e. orthography. So, for example, Anders Ahlqvist (2000: 611–13) pointed out the originality of medieval Irish grammarians in thinking about prepositional phrases. He drew attention to the nominal paradigms found in *Auraicept na nÉces* which build on the Latin system of six cases but expand it considerably with additional 'case-forms' that combine nouns with almost all conceivable prepositions, spelled as one word (e.g. *cofer* 'to (the) man', *sechfer* 'past (the) man', *trefer* 'through (the) man' etc.) and other proclitics such as the copula (*isfer* 'the man is').<sup>110</sup> These novel 'case-forms' are imagined as single orthographical words, contrary to the modern convention of separating unstressed elements and the noun by a space (*co fer*, *is fer* etc.). Ahlqvist summarised this preference for syntactic clusters over syntactic 'atoms' (1974: 185): 'in early Irish writing practice syntactic units [...] were felt to be more worthy of being separated from each other by word boundaries, in other words forming graphemic "words", than the elements they were made up of.' He also suggested that the treatment of prepositional phrases as single morphological words rather than as complex syntactic objects may be compared to the way in which conjugated prepositions function in Irish: they can be considered *bona fide* morphological words similar to verbs with personal endings (Ahlqvist 1974: 189). The prepositional paradigms in the *Auraicept* may thus be formed by analogy to the paradigms of conjugated prepositions.

Moreover, a quantitative study has recently been conducted by a group of scholars led by Dagmar Bronner (Bronner et al. 2018) which analysed several early manuscripts written in Irish minuscule to observe patterns of (non-)separation in specific syntactic constructions.<sup>111</sup> Three types of constructions were considered:

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<sup>110</sup> A dedicated edition of this 'declensional' table based on multiple manuscript witnesses is found in Ahlqvist (2000: 611–12; cf. Ahlqvist 1983: 52–3).

<sup>111</sup> I am thankful to Dr Chantal Kobel at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies for drawing my attention to this article.

prepositions with nouns, articles with nouns, prepositions with articles and nouns. The study found that in majority of cases scribes preferred to write these constructions without spaces or with minimal spaces, evidently interpreting them as a single stress group which, as the authors concluded, ‘arguably constituted a basic orthographic and conceptual unit in medieval Irish scholars’ minds’ (Bronner et al. 2018: 56). Telling evidence for the fluid notion of orthographic word in Irish manuscripts has been collected by Liam Breatnach who noted several cases where an abbreviation is used across word-boundaries in the early-fifteenth century manuscript *Leabhar Breac*.<sup>112</sup> Among these examples are prepositional phrases, e.g. *hi midnocht* ‘at midnight’ where the m-stroke is added over the preceding vowel (*hīidnocht*) or *d’érned* ‘for the giving/explaining’ (i.e. ‘to give/to explain’) where *er* is abbreviated with a stroke over *d* (*ḍned*). Interestingly, this is also done in Latin phrases, e.g. *in terra* ‘on earth’ written with an *i* with a stroke through the shaft, which normally stands for the preposition *inter*, but in this case abbreviates the preposition and the first syllable of the noun ‘*in ter-ra*’ (*ira*). Moreover, the compendium *ɔ* for *con/com* is sometimes used to mark nasalisation after the preposition *co* ‘with’ and the conjunction *co* ‘so that’: *co mbuidnib* ‘with troops’ written as *ɔbuidnib* or *co mbuí* ‘so that he/she/it was’ written as *ɔbui*.<sup>113</sup> This evidence thus supports the idea that writing practices were informed by spoken language where stress-groups could be more easily separated than grammatical units (Ahlqvist 2000: 612; Thurneysen 1946: 24).

At the same time, it should be stressed that Irish intellectuals were not ignorant of the difference between morphology and syntax in relation to word boundaries. Indeed, medieval grammarians were well aware that prepositions are a separate part of speech. The model of *octo partes orationis* inherited from Latin grammar provided an important analytical tool for classifying words based on their morphological properties (cf. *Auraic*. 316–21). Therefore, one could conclude that these vernacular scribal practices were informed by phonological structures but did

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<sup>112</sup> These examples have been kindly provided to me by Prof. Liam Breatnach at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies in personal communication.

<sup>113</sup> It is also noted in *eDIL* that the nasalising conjunction *co n-* was ‘frequently abbreviated *ɔ* in earlier language even where nasalizing *n* would not normally appear’ (*eDIL*, s.v. *co* 3).

not necessarily interfere with the theoretical understating of morphological and syntactic units.<sup>114</sup>

The question that one may ask is whether spellings like *isfer*, *trefer* etc. reflect Irish scribes' idea of a single phonological unit, i.e. phonological word. Poppe (2016: 69–70) noted that, while some modern scholars do not consider clitics to be a part of phonological words, others give the status of a phonological word to entire stress-groups. He also added that this latter group of scholars viewed Celtic languages, and Irish in particular, as lacking the notion of a phonologically autonomous word, instead prioritising word groups built around a single stressed unit. Poppe's (2016: 81–3) own analysis of Old Irish metalinguistic evidence, while confirming the idea that a 'word' could be understood as a longer utterance, does not suggest that this approach entirely suppressed the notion of an autonomous phonological word. I may add, moreover, that the usage of *son* in the St Gall glosses, discussed in detail in Chapter 1, indicates that it was understood to refer to the phonological shape of grammatical words, most commonly nouns.<sup>115</sup> All of this suggests that in the vernacular practice orthographic words do not always correspond to the notions of a grammatical and phonological word and rely on the prosodic qualities of oral speech rather than on strictly grammatical principles. In addition, as was noted earlier, the spelling conventions in regard to word separation may be influenced by certain features of Old Irish morpho-syntax, such as infixed pronouns and conjugated prepositions.

The above considerations apply to vernacular writing. Matters change somewhat when Irish scholiasts copy or write Latin. Several scholars have highlighted the role of Irish scribes in introducing word separation to Latin writing. In Roman practice, starting from the second century AD, it became common to forego the previously used system of word separation (by means of interpuncts) in favour of *scriptura continua*, uninterrupted writing (Bischoff 1990: 173; Desbordes 1990: 228–30; Saenger 1997: 9–13). Never having been a part of the Roman world, Ireland received

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<sup>114</sup> Bronner et al. (2018: 60) arrived at a similar conclusion, although they are more sceptical regarding the theoretical competency of the scribes: 'medieval Irish scribes and scholars had inevitably pre-theoretical and sometimes conflicting concepts of words as units of the grammar and the lexicon and as units of the utterance and of the prosodic hierarchy respectively, since both units can be realised as orthographic words'.

<sup>115</sup> See, for example, Sg. 73b3=73b11e where *son* refers to a compound word as a self-contained unit, Sg. 27b15=27b38hh where it refers to the Greek word *noma* (sic) from which the Latin *nomen* is supposedly derived. For a discussion of *son*, see pp. 38–45 above.

Latin not only as a foreign language but as a language more often written than spoken. The lack of native-speaker proficiency, together with the primarily visual nature of Latin, as Malcolm Parkes (1991: 2–3) suggested, enabled Irish scribes to re-evaluate writing as a form of communication independent from oral speech and, by the same token, to develop new ways to transmit information graphically.<sup>116</sup> This includes not only word separation but also abundant use of abbreviations, punctuation and syntactic construe marks (Parkes 1991: 3–9). To ensure easier comprehension, Irish scribes dispensed with the inherited practice of *scriptura continua* and introduced word separation based on morphological, lexical and syntactic criteria which were familiar to them from the grammatical curriculum.<sup>117</sup> Paul Saenger, however, noted that while Insular scribes were more conscious of the orthographic word in their Latin writings, the status of the preposition as an independent word, in contrast to a prefix in a composite word, still remained ambiguous as they often ‘failed to insert space consistently after monosyllabic prepositions’ (Saenger 1997: 87).<sup>118</sup> If this problem persisted practically, it was not for the lack of theoretical awareness. Saenger simultaneously referred to a passage in *Anonymus ad Cuimnán* where it is suggested that prepositions should be either separated from their nominal objects or joined to the *figura* of another word, presumably when they are understood as bound morphemes (Saenger 1997: 83; cf. *Ad Cuimn.* 149.18–26). Overall, Saenger noted the increased emphasis in grammatical works on the term *figura* in relation not to letters, but to words. Beside *Anonymus ad Cuimnán*, it is also found in the eighth-century anonymous Hiberno-Latin grammar *Ars Bernensis*:

*Figura quomodo definitur? Figura est forma rei uel nominis denuntiati. Item alia definitio: figura est habitus uocum, per quas corpora aut res significantur, utrum sua natura an per artem enuntiantur (AH 85.14–17).*

[How is *figura* defined? *Figura* is the shape of a thing or [its] assigned name. Likewise, another definition: *figura* is the external aspect of words (*uoces*)

<sup>116</sup> This view further strengthens the importance of a single letter as an abstract visual symbol discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>117</sup> Examples of early Hiberno-Latin manuscripts where word separation is applied consistently are the late-seventh-century Antiphonary of Bangor (Milan, Ambrosiana, MS C.5. inf.), the early-eighth-century Schaffhausen Adomnán (Schaffhausen, Stadtbibliothek, MS Gen. 1) and the late-seventh-century Book of Mulling (Dublin, TCD, MS 60 (A.I.15)). See Parkes (1991: 4); Saenger (1997: 83).

<sup>118</sup> Bischoff (1990: 173) made a similar observation regarding Carolingian manuscripts: ‘In Carolingian times it is still generally the practice to draw prepositions and other short words towards the following word’. However, at another place Saenger (1997: 114) discussed the Hiberno-Latin *Ars Laureshamensis* where the author acknowledges the difference between morphemes and freestanding prepositions (*Laur.* 139.81–6).

through which bodies or things are signified, whether they are expressed through their nature or through an *ars*].

Thus it seems that Irish grammarians became increasingly aware of the visual image of the word on a page. Saenger further argued that this awareness, which eventually led to the universal acceptance of word separation in European manuscripts by the late middle ages, aligned well with the neural resources of the brain for the processing of visual information, thus optimising the reading process and facilitating the phenomenon of silent reading. He proposed that word shape, with its pre-determined placement of ascenders, descenders and neutral graphic elements in lower-case scripts allowed the reader to recognise words by their visual envelopes (Saenger 1997: 19–21).

Approaching the problem from the perspective of literacy studies, David Olson (1994: 68–78) argued that it was the invention of writing that brought into existence words as linguistic entities and as objects of thought. The ability to write speech down made possible the very idea of grammatical analysis:

Rather than viewing writing as the attempt to capture the existing knowledge of syntax, writing provided a model for speech, thereby making the language available for analysis into syntactic constituents, the primary ones being words which then became subjects of philosophical reflection as well as objects of definition. Words became things (Olson 1994: 76).

There is therefore a strong argument in favour of the orthographical aspect as the foundation for understanding ‘word’ as a concept. When written down between two spaces, a finite unit of sound and sense becomes clearly delineated (cf. Saenger 1997: 34). This can, to some degree, be applied to the unseparated pairs of nouns with prepositions as they may be perceived as expressing a singular idea, an inflected word whose meaning is modified by the preposition as opposed to the base, nominative form. With this we finally encounter the idea of meaning as a factor in classifying linguistic units as words, and it will be surveyed next.

### *Lexical and Semantic Word*

A distinction is sometimes made between a lexical and a semantic word (Packard 2000: 8–10). The lexical criterion is informed by the ‘idiosyncratic, arbitrary pairings of sound and meaning’ that are stored in memory and cannot be generated *ad hoc* through application of grammatical rules (Packard 2000: 9). Here, words are understood as listed items in a lexicon – variously referred to as lexemes, lemmata or listemes (cf. Di Sciullo and Williams 1987: 3–5). A semantic word more precisely

designates the concept, the semantic primitive conveyed by the word, that is meaning without the form (cf. Packard 2000: 9–10).

Such intricacies may appear superfluous at first but a surprisingly close parallel to this distinction can be found in Augustine's *De dialectica* where he introduces four entities that participate in the semantic process: *uerbum*, *dicibile*, *dictio* and *res*. It is worth citing the lengthy passage in full as it will become an important reference point for further discussion:

*Cum ergo uerbum ore procedit, si propter se procedit id est ut de ipso uerbo aliquid quaeratur aut disputetur, res est utique disputationi quaestioneque subiecta, sed ipsa res **uerbum** uocatur. Quidquid autem ex uerbo non aures sed animus sentit et ipso animo tenetur inclusum, **dicibile** uocatur. Cum uero uerbum procedit non propter se sed propter aliud aliquid significandum, **dictio** uocatur. **Res** autem ipsa, quae iam uerbum non est neque uerbi in mente conceptio, sive habeat uerbum quo significari possit, sive non habeat, nihil aliud quam res uocatur proprio iam nomine. Haec ergo quattuor distincta teneantur; uerbum, dicibile, dictio, res. Quod dixi **uerbum**, et uerbum est et uerbum significat. Quod dixi **dicibile**, uerbum est, nec tamen uerbum, sed quod in uerbo intellegitur et animo continetur, significat. Quod dixi **ditionem**, uerbum est, sed quod iam illa duo simul id est et ipsum uerbum et quod fit in animo per uerbum significat. Quod dixi **rem**, uerbum est, quod praeter illa tria quae dicta sunt quidquid restat significat.*

[When, therefore, a word is uttered for its own sake, that is, so that something is being asked or argued about the word itself, clearly it is the thing which is the subject of disputation and inquiry; but the thing in this case is called a *uerbum*. Now that which the mind not the ears perceives from the word and which is held within the mind itself is called a *dicibile*. When a word is spoken not for its own sake but for the sake of signifying something else, it is called a *dictio*. The thing itself which is neither a word nor the conception of a word in the mind, whether or not it has a word by which it can be signified, is called nothing but a *res* in the proper sense of the name. Therefore, these four are to be kept distinct: the *uerbum*, the *dicibile*, the *dictio*, and the *res*. 'Verbum' both is a word and signifies a word. 'Dicibile' is a word; however, it does not signify a word but what is understood in the word and contained in the mind. 'Dictio' is also a word, but it signifies both the first two, that is, the word itself and what is brought about in the mind by means of the word. 'Res' is a word which signifies whatever remains beyond the three that have been mentioned (Aug. *De dial.* V.8)].

Apart from *res* which refers to objects in the physical world, the other three components of Augustine's schema are linguistic entities. The cluster *uerbum* – *dicibile* – *dictio* is an accurate reproduction of the Stoic triad of *lexis*, *lekton* and *logos* (Long 2005). The *uerbum* or *lexis* is word-as-form, a combination of grammatical properties which have been discussed in the previous section. Augustine himself emphasises the phonological aspect of *uerbum*: *Omne uerbum sonat. Cum enim est in*

*scriptio, non verbum sed verbi signum est* 'Every word is a sound, for when it is written it is not a word but the sign of a word' (Aug. *De dial.* V.7). Besides, *verbum/lexis* is also a bearer of grammatical properties (Long 2005: 54–5). The *dicibile* or *lekton*, literally 'that which can be said', is the pure incorporeal meaning and is, in this sense, reminiscent of the of the semantic word in that both refer strictly to the conceptual core encoded by a word. The concept of *dicibile* and comparable ideas within Irish tradition will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. *Dictio* and *logos*, then, represent the unity of form and meaning, a functional linguistic sign in the Saussurean sense. This is the concept closest to the notion of the lexical word whereby both its grammatical and semantic properties are taken into consideration and it will be the primary focus of the remainder of the chapter.

A key feature of the lexical word, as was mentioned above, is its 'listedness' – it is an (alphabetised) entry in the lexicon of a language. There are two important implications of this feature. First, the notion of a lexical word usually refers specifically to the base-form or the dictionary form, not its inflected variants (cf. Lyons 1968, 197–8). Second, in order to create an alphabetised list, words need to have a fixed spelling. This combination of orthographic and semantic aspects in understanding the notion of word found particular prominence in early medieval, and specifically Irish, intellectual tradition. This is most clearly manifested in the emergence and flourishing of the alphabetic glossary as an independent genre of scholarly literature (Saenger 1997: 90–2). Saenger proposed that this was a reflex of word division introduced by Insular scribes for the ease of learning and comprehending Latin. He offered examples from the early English tradition: Bede's *De orthographia*, the 'Épinal Glossary', the 'Corpus Glossary' – glossaries which explain Latin lemmata sometimes in simpler Latin and sometimes in Old English. Looking at the Irish tradition, however, one will find that the better known early glossaries, such as *De origine scoticae linguae*, 'O'Davoren's Glossary', *Dúil Dromma Cetta* and *Sanas Cormaic*, comprise primarily vernacular lemmata which are then interpreted using a variety of strategies: providing a definition or a synonym, deriving a word from a different language, particularly one of the *tres linguae sacrae*, or offering a more elaborate vernacular etymology (cf. Russell 2008: 10).<sup>119</sup> This

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<sup>119</sup> A few words can be said regarding the dating of these glossaries, starting with Paul Russell's (1996: 163) rather pessimistic remark that 'dating glossaries on linguistic grounds is fraught with difficulty'. Nevertheless, certain estimations can be made. *De origine scoticae linguae* (also known as 'O'Mulconry's Glossary') is usually considered to contain the earliest vernacular material, dating to



indicates that the notion of a word as a unit of meaning enclosed in a finite orthographic form applied as readily to the vernacular as it did to the less familiar Latin.

Thus, for now, we may conclude that ‘word’ is a multifaceted concept whose various aspects come to prominence in different contexts. Word as a grammatical unit is studied by grammarians, phonological words are of significance in poetic matters as well as in grammar, orthographic words have practical use for scribes and serve as the most tangible overt representation of a word. Semantic word finds application when meaning is considered independently of form while lexical words embody the full linguistic sign whereby a certain grammatical form, expressed phonologically and represented orthographically, encodes certain semantic content. With these observations in mind, we may proceed to considering medieval Irish intellectuals’ own reflections on the word in its various capacities.

### ***Words for Word***

One specialised term for ‘word’ has already been considered – Old Irish *son* which in a grammatical context can signify a phonological word. But indeed, there is a much larger variety of lexical items to signify ‘word’ in Old Irish, including such terms as *epert*, *bríathar*, *focal* and, in certain contexts, *aisnéis*.

An exploration of vernacular terms for ‘word’ has been recently undertaken by Erich Poppe (2016) who based his study mainly on the *Auraicept* and *Dliged sésa*. Many of the discussion points presented below take Poppe’s findings as a starting point and offer further examples and considerations. Following Poppe’s lead, we may consult *Dliged sésa*, the text which introduces a nuanced distinction between *son* and *guth*. The author also weighs in on the types of linguistic utterances, both generally and pertaining specifically to poetic speech. They appear in the following order:

*Cuin as aisnéis .i. ó dhíbh n-ernailibh nó an tan as cíall chomhlán.*

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the early Old Irish period of the seventh century, although a second stratum of entries can also be recognised which belongs to the late Old Irish or early Middle Irish period, i.e. late-ninth – early-tenth century (Mac Neill 1932; Moran 2019: 76–7). *Dúil Dromma Cetta* and the Cormac group of glossaries are closely related. As Paul Russell (1996) has shown, an early version of *Dúil Dromma Cetta*, compiled in the ninth century, served as the foundation for the short version of *Sanas Cormaic* whose creation is associated with Cormac mac Cuillenáin (d. 908), bishop and king of Cashel. ‘O’Davoren’s Glossary’ is slightly removed from the rest of the glossarial tradition as it is comprised almost exclusively of lemmata culled from legal material from the seventh and eighth century, including, most prominently, *Bretha Nemed Toísech*, *Bretha Nemed Dédenach* and *Senchas Már* (Breatnach 2005: 100–8).

[When is it narration? i.e. from the two divisions or when the sense is complete].

*Cuin as ebirt .i. an tan sluinnes [ní .i.] siolla no dha siolla don anmair 7 ní defrigh ní.*

[When is it *epert*? i.e. when it signifies something i.e. a syllable or two syllables to a name and it does not differentiate anything].

*Cuin as ail .i. ail suthain i rund.*

[When is it a reproach? i.e. a lasting reproach in verse form].<sup>120</sup>

*Cuin as bríathar .i. in bríathar sechtair an tan dheachraighis ní.*

[When is it a *bríathar*? i.e. the word outside [the mouth], when it differentiates something].

*Cuin as aoi .i. an tan as bairdne nō filidhecht.*

[When is it a composition? i.e. when it is bardic craft or *filidecht*].

*Cuin as airc[h]eado(i)l .i. aircheadal toimhsidhe na bfiledh*

[When is it verse? i.e. a measured verse of the poets (ed. Corthals 2007: 137; modified according to Poppe 2016: 75 n. 27; my translation)].

In this passage, *aisnéis* ‘narration’, *ail* ‘reproach’, *aí* ‘composition’ and *airchetal* ‘verse’ seem to belong to the realm of poetic craft, whereas *epert* and *bríathar* pertain to the realm of grammatical metalanguage. It is the latter two that are of importance to the present discussion. It is worth, however, adding a few remarks on the term *aisnéis*, here translated as ‘narration’.

As the verbal noun of *as-indet* ‘declares, tells’, it has a general meaning of ‘act of relating, telling, explaining’ (*eDIL*, s.v.). While it does not, strictly speaking, signify a word, the term has important applications in describing elements of discourse. The St Gall glosses, once again, introduce a highly specialised usage of *aisnéis*. Among its seven attestations in the corpus, Stokes and Strachan choose to translate it as ‘pronunciation’ on three occasions:

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<sup>120</sup> Corthal’s proposed reading is *āil* ‘wish’ (*Wunsch*), with the fada supplied (Corthals 2007: 137, 140). However, it appears more plausible to take it as *ail* ‘reproach’. This suggestion is based on the similarity to the ninth-century ‘Old Irish Tract on Satire’ which lists three divisions of satire: *aisnéis* ‘narration’, *ail* ‘reproach’, *airchetal aíre* ‘versified satire’. Howard Meroney (1950) and Roisin McLaughlin (2008: 48–50) noted the connection of this text to contemporary legal material, including the *Bretha Nemed* tradition. It may not be a coincidence that the three are also present (with *airchetal* instead of *airchetal aíre*) in the cited passage of *Dliged sésa* which itself belongs to *Bretha Nemed Dédenach*. This parallel is pointed out by McLaughlin (2008: 65). She also noted that, apart from *Dliged sésa*, the phrase *ail suthain i rund* ‘lasting reproach in verse form’ is also found in the Middle Irish glosses to the ‘Old Irish Heptad on Satire’ which is a part of *Senchas Már* (McLaughlin 2008: 88–9).

[gl. *ipsae pronuntiationes*] .i. *derb-aisndísín, derb-fogir*.

[i.e. certain precise pronunciations, certain precise sounds (Sg. 3b23=3b30xx)].

[gl. *non posse constare*] .i. *ar chuit aisndísen 7 foguir*.

[i.e. as regards pronunciation and sound (Sg. 3b25=3b32zz)].

[gl. *cacenphatí*] *inna aisndísen dochuirde .i. dochrud leo .n. indiad .m.*

[of the disagreeable pronunciation i.e. n after m they deemed disagreeable' (Sg. 203a4=203a6h)].

The first two examples link *aisnéis* to *fogur* 'sound' which in the St Gall corpus refers to the sound of separate phonemes (cf. p. 38; Krivoshchekova 2023: 16–21). Similar application of *aisnéis* is also evident in the third example where it refers to the sound of the cluster 'mn' when the phrase *cum nobis* is pronounced together. One possible explanation of why it would be used alongside *fogur* in the discussion of phonemes is that *aisndís* might have been perceived as an analogical formation to Latin *pronuntiatio*, whereby both nouns derive from compound verbs: *as-indet* 'declares' < *as-* + *in-fét* 'tells, relates' and *pronuntio* 'I proclaim' < *pro-* + *nuntio* 'I relate, I narrate'.

The other four attestations, however, seem to conform to the more general sense of 'expression', 'speaking' or 'statement', for instance:

[gl. *quae*]: .i. *aisndeis ecndairc indib huilib*.

[i.e. expression of the absent in them all (Sg. 161b3=161b5b)].

[gl. *relativa*]: .i. *atarcadach .i. diarobae aisdís riam*.

i.e. anaphoric, i.e. of which there has been a speaking before' (Sg. 197a6=197a26s)].<sup>121</sup>

There does not appear to be an explicitly phonological function of *aisnéis* in these examples. Rather, they emphasise the meaning encoded in certain parts of speech (nouns in the first example, the pronouns *is* 'he' and *iste* 'himself' in the second). Similarly, the author of *Dliged sésa* specifies that *aisnéis* possesses 'complete sense' (*cíall chomlán*).

Poppe (2016: 77) proposed to translate *aisnéis* as 'utterance'. This rendering, one may add, has the benefit of evoking the specialised meaning of the term 'utterance'

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<sup>121</sup> See also Sg. 59b7=59b12h, 198a10=198a16s.

in modern linguistics where it is understood as ‘a stretch of speech about which no assumptions have been made in terms of linguistic theory’ as opposed to the notion of ‘sentence’ (Crystal 2008: 505–6). Thus an utterance may consist of a single word or a more continuous speech act by a single speaker that is perceived in the entirety of its form of expression and meaning. In the light of this, the phrase *cíall chomlán* may be understood as referring not only to the meaning of words but of longer utterances where it exceeds the sum of individual word-meanings. So, for example, the Milan glosses suggest that a prayer (*guide*) can be an *aisnéis* (Ml. 24b5). The Milan corpus has an overall strong preference for emphasising the semantic aspect of an ‘utterance’.<sup>122</sup>

### *Epert*

Where *aisnéis* appears to signify utterances of unspecified length, the term *epert* is perhaps the closest equivalent to the notion of a lexical word. The definition in *Dliged sésa* states that a linguistic unit can be called an *epert* ‘when it signifies something’ (*an tan sluinnes ní*) and specifies: ‘a syllable or two syllables to a name and it does not differentiate anything’. Once again, the semantic aspect is at the forefront: a word gives expression to a certain mental concept or meaning. In this case, *epert* is specifically identified with names of things, i.e. nouns, as indicated by the use of the term *ainmm*.<sup>123</sup> By excluding other parts of speech from the category of ‘words’ (or rather by not conspicuously acknowledging their inclusion), this view conforms to the logic of glossary-making where nouns constitute a large majority of all lemmata.<sup>124</sup> It is worth noting that the verb *sluindid* which is commonly applied in the sense ‘signifies’ has an additional meaning ‘names’ (*eDIL*, s.v.). So in the Würzburg glosses commenting on a passage from 2 Corinthians:

<sup>122</sup> Out of the total 51 attestations across 47 glosses, *aisnéis* has the meaning of ‘explanation’, ‘exposition’ or ‘setting forth’ in 23 glosses, according to Stokes and Strachan’s translation. Here, the question is not simply about lexical meaning as such, but about interpretation. On one occasion, it is applied to the levels of biblical exegesis: *issamlid léicfimmini doibsom aisndis dintsens 7 dinmoralus manip ecoir frisinstoir adfiadamni* ‘it is thus we will leave to them the exposition of the sense and the morality, if it is not at variance with the history that we relate’ (Ml. 14d10). On meaning as interpretation, see Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>123</sup> *Ainmm* as a gloss on Latin *nomen* is attested multiple times in the St Gall glosses (e.g. Sg. 6a6=6a10k, 71b5=71b14l, 211b6=211b14h) as well as in the *Auraicept* (300).

<sup>124</sup> One clear exception to this is ‘O’Davoren’s Glossary’ where, as Paul Russell (1999a: 88) noted, the headwords are ‘invariably presented in the form they appear in the text from which they derive, while the other glossaries usually restore a nominative of a noun or a verbal noun in the headword’. Moreover, ‘O’Davoren’s Glossary’ offers rare examples of verbal forms as headwords (Russell 1988: 6).

*Incipimus iterum nosmet ipsos commendare aut numquid egemus sicut quidam commendaticiiis epistulis ad vos aut ex vobis?*

[Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? (2 Cor. 3:1)].

[gl. *uox*]: .i. *runsluinfemni didiu cene fanisin*.

[i.e. we ourselves shall, then, be able to name ourselves without it (Wb. 15a4)].

This particular example employs figurative expression: speaking on behalf of himself and St Timothy, St Paul talks about naming themselves as the followers of Christ through the act of preaching. But indeed, the core idea is similar: through this act they would be able to identify themselves with a certain idea in the eyes of their audience. Likewise in language, naming, like signification, involves matching a thing or a concept to a specific verbal sign. Thus, returning to *Dliged sésa*, the phrase *an tan sluinnes ní* can be read both as ‘when it signifies something’ and ‘when it names something’.

The definition of *epert* also provides a clear description of its length as it is said to consist of ‘a syllable or two syllables’. Rather than a definitive limit on the length of the word, I suggest that this remark should be taken to mean that *epert* is a stand-alone (lexical) word as opposed to a stress-group or other more complex linguistic formations. This statement can be contrasted with a passage in the *Auraicept* concerning unusually long words. The author(s) observe that the longest word in Latin has thirteen syllables whereas the longest Irish word consists of eight syllables (*Auraic*. 1435–8). The copy of the text in the Yellow Book of Lecan also contains a remark that speaks of certain poets, both Irish and Roman, who compete with each other by trying to artificially manufacture words ‘over the heptad’ (*re sechtu*), that is, of more than seven syllables (*Auraic*. 4524–6).<sup>125</sup> It is possible to conclude, then, the awareness of syllabic structure helps to create a rough mental image of a word and what it might sound or look like by delineating its tentative phonological and orthographic boundaries.

Another slightly puzzling part of the definition provided by the author of *Dliged sésa* is that an *epert* ‘does not differentiate anything’ (*ni defrigh ní*). It is evidently in

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<sup>125</sup> A discussion of this passage, including the possible source of the longest Latin word (*honorificabilitudinitatibus*), is in Poppe (2016: 71–3). Note that in this passage the term *focal* is used, rather *epert* or *bríathar*. On *focal*, see below (pp. 110–15). The mention of seven syllables as the acceptable length for a word may point towards *Auraicept*’s ties to early Irish poetic tradition where heptasyllabic metres were common.

interplay with a similar remark in the definition of *bríathar* which, on the contrary, is said to differentiate something (*an tan dheachraighis ní*). Therefore, they will be addressed together in the discussion of *bríathar* below (pp. 102–9).

The definition of *epert* offered in *Dlited sésa* thus presents it as an independent lexical unit with a defined meaning and a suggested limit on its length. It would be instructive to examine the usage of *epert* in other texts. Erich Poppe (2016: 79–81) convincingly argued that in the St Gall glosses and *Auraicept na nÉces epert* consistently functions as a semantic loan transfer from Latin *dictio*, given their similar derivation from the verbs of speaking (*as-beir* and *dicere* respectively).<sup>126</sup> One of the key pieces of evidence for this is the vernacular rendering of Priscian's definition of *oratio* 'speech' in the *Auraicept*:

*ut Priscianus dixit: Oratio est or[di]natio congrua[m] dictionum perfectam [que] sententiam demonstrans .i. ata in innsci ordugud comimaircide na n-epert failisiges in ceil[l] foirbthi.*

[As Priscian says: *oratio* is the appropriate ordering of words (*dictionum*) which shows a complete idea (*sententia*), that is, speech is an appropriate order of the words (*na n-epert*) that shows perfect sense (*Auraic.* 589–92; cf. *GL* II 53.28–9)].

This rendering of *dictio* as *epert* is all the more remarkable considering the fact that this is one of only two attestations of *epert* in the *Auraicept*, while in the overwhelming majority of cases when the notion of 'word' is in question, the author(s) opt for the term *focal* (cf. pp. 110–15).<sup>127</sup> Thus an *epert*, understood as the smallest lexical unit, becomes a building block in meaningful discourse. Vernacular *epert* adopts the identity of the Latin *dictio* as a lexical and semantic entity.<sup>128</sup>

Another noteworthy instance of this is a gloss in St Gall regarding Priscian's comment on the difference between a word (*dictio*) and a syllable:

*Differt autem dictio a syllaba, non solum quod syllaba pars est dictionis, sed etiam quod dictio dicendum, hoc est intelligendum, aliquid habet (GL II 53.13–14).*

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<sup>126</sup> While this morphological similarity is not, to my knowledge, acknowledged in the sources, the etymology of *epert* offered in *De origine scoticae linguae* derives it from a Greek verb of speaking: *Epert grece ab epe .i. dic 'Epert 'saying', Greek, from epe [εἶπέ], i.e. say!* (*DOSL* 408). This etymology does not technically hold up but the use of the Greek verb εἶπον 'to say, speak' is correct and it indicates certain awareness of the general direction where the origin of the term *epert* should be sought.

<sup>127</sup> The other attestation is in *Auraic.* 1553–8. Poppe (2016: 80) noted that in this passage the usage of *epert* is determined by its reliance on Donatus' use of *dictio*.

<sup>128</sup> On Priscian's concept of *dictio*, see Hyman (2005: 167).

[A word differs from a syllable not only in that a syllable is a part of the word, but also in that a word has something to be said, that is, to be understood].

[gl. *intelligendum*]: .i. *sluindith folad ind epert*.

[i.e. the word expresses substance (Sg. 25b10=25b24r)].<sup>129</sup>

The first thing that stands out in this short gloss is its similarity to the phrase *an tan sluinness ní* ‘when it signifies something’ in *Dliged sésa*. While this may not be a direct connection, the two texts share a common specialised understanding of *epert*. Moreover, this strong association of *epert* with a lexical unit is akin to Augustine’s understanding of *dictio* as a linguistic sign which ‘signifies both [...] the word itself and what it brought about in the mind by means of the word’ (*et ipsum verbum et quod fit in animo per verbum significat*). However, based on the evidence of the St Gall glosses and the *Auraicept*, this usage is almost certainly indebted to Priscian rather than Augustine. Further testimony to this is found in the Hiberno-Latin *Ars Laureshamensis* whose author, although his work is a commentary on Donatus, evokes Priscian in his definition of *dictio*: *Dictio est pars minima uocis constructae plenumque sensum habentis* ‘A word is the smallest part of speech sound which is connected and has a full sense’ (*Laur.* 4.53–5.54).<sup>130</sup> It is important to note that here, like in Priscian’s original passage, the fullness of sense is an attribute of the connected discourse rather than of *dictio* itself.<sup>131</sup> As much is evident from a gloss on Priscian’s definition in St Gall: .i. *do láni chétbutho inna huilae insce* ‘i.e. for the fullness of meaning of the whole discourse’ (Sg. 25b7=25b22o). This is consistent with earlier remarks on *aisnéis* as an (extensive) utterance and the ‘complete sense’ (*cíall chomlán*) as its feature. In this scheme, *dictio* or *epert* are only constituents of larger discourse and thus possess discrete, rather than full, meaning.

One of the glosses also comments on the expected length of an *epert*. Priscian notes that the *quantitas* ‘size’ of a *dictio* is determined by whether it is simple or compound, thus hinting at a morphological understanding of the word (*GL* II 177.10–13). The glossator adds: .i. *issinméit mbis indepert .i. immar fa bec* ‘i.e. in the

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<sup>129</sup> Other examples of *epert* glossing *dictio* are Sg. 9a22=9a33ab, 17b11=17b27y, 73a16=43a41mm, 73b2=73b9c.

<sup>130</sup> See also Saenger’s (1997: 113–14) comments on Sedulius Scottus’ use of *dictio* whereby it ‘becomes equivalent to our notion of “word”’.

<sup>131</sup> Compare to Priscian’s definition: *Dictio est pars minima orationis constructae, id est ordine compositae: pars autem, quantum ad totum intelligendum, id est ad totius sensus intellectum* ‘A word is the smallest part of connected, that is, orderly composed speech; moreover, [it is] a part [which pertains] to the understanding of the whole, that is, to the understanding of the full meaning’ (*GL* II 53.8–10).

extent to which the word is: i.e. whether it be great or small' (Sg. 73a16=73a41mm). The gloss does not explicitly acknowledge the morphological distinction between simple and compound words, focusing on the size of the word instead by referring to its *méit* 'magnitude (of size, quantity, number, extent, degree)' (*eDIL*, s.v.). It appears that simple and compound words are here mapped onto the scale of length, from short to long. This is reminiscent of the attempt made in *Dliged sésa* to define word length, although the St Gall glossator does not make any specific suggestions in this regard. The implication of the quantifiable nature of *epert* still remains.

At the same time, it should be noted that *epert* does not always have this specialised usage. As the verbal noun of *as-beir* 'says, speaks', it is often used in the more general sense 'the act of speaking' which does not connote any of the features that allow the audience to identify such an *epert* specifically as a lexical word. The Milan glosses, for example, almost exclusively adhere to this generalised usage across their 40 attestations of *epert*. Instances of it can also be found in the St Gall corpus (e.g. Sg. 193b5=193b21cc, 203a8=203a15q).

### *Bríathar*

In addition to *epert*, the author of *Dliged sésa* found it necessary to add yet another word for 'word' – *bríathar*. This is a more common term with a wider spectrum of meanings, as will be shown shortly. The definition given for *bríathar* states that it is 'the word outside [the mouth], when it differentiates something' (*.i. in bríathar sechtair an tan dheachraighis ní*). Let us start by addressing the first half of the definition.

Regarding the 'placement' of *bríathar* outside the body of the speaker, *Dliged sésa* offers further clarification that involves an ordered account of the parts of the body involved in the production of speech:

*Cuin bidh guth .i. i mbél.*

[When is it voice? i.e. in the mouth].

*Cuin bidh bríathar .i. sechtair béoil.*

[When is it word? i.e. outside the mouth].

*Cuin bidh son .i. an tan bhíos i mbráighid, uair son i mbráighid 7 guth i mbélaibh.*



[When is it sound i.e. when it is in the throat, since it is sound in the throat, but voice in the mouth (ed. Corthals 2007: 137; my translation).

These statements are in agreement with those discussed in Chapter 1 concerning *guth* (cf. pp. 32–5). There we have seen how *guth* is presented as a joint product of the ‘speaking of the mind’ (*iomrádh menman*) and the sound (*son*) in the throat. This *guth*, with its potential for spoken expression, resides in the mouth, in what can be described as a liminal state between its conception in the mind (*cíall*) and its actualisation. It becomes a fully-fledged *bríathar* when it is spoken aloud, that is, when it is ‘outside the mouth’. Thus *bríathar* traces its genealogical ‘lineage’ via *guth* to both *son* and *cíall*.

Interestingly, the anonymous author of the early-ninth-century ‘Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter’ arrives at a somewhat similar understanding of *bríathar* by juxtaposing the word outside the mouth and its counterpart in the mind.<sup>132</sup> For this, the author draws on Gregory the Great’s *Homiliae in Ezechielem* (although this fact is not acknowledged directly):

*Ní théchte dúinni tuilled nóibscrepra díanechtair, ol nach tan dofúarcaib int augtur bréthir for a gin sechtair, bíd bríathar for a menmain frísghair došuidiu, ut dicitur: ‘Illud verbum quod foris protulit illi verbo quod intus latebat coniungit’.*

[It does not behove us to add to the Holy Scripture from without, for whenever the author lets out a word outside his mouth, there is a word in his mind that answers to it, as it is said: ‘That word which he uttered outwardly he connects to the word that was hidden within (OIT 408–14; translation lightly modified)].<sup>133</sup>

Although the ultimate source for this passage is Gregory, the vernacular phrasing is rather similar to *Dliged sésa*: compare *sechtair béoil* ‘outside the mouth’ in *Dliged sésa* and *bréthir for a gin sechtair* which can be translated literally as ‘a word upon his mouth outside’. In addition to this external word, the author of the ‘Old Irish Treatise’ postulates a mental word that serves as the blueprint of the word expressed outwardly (cf. Chapter 7). Likewise, *bríathar* in *Dliged sésa* is not limited to the notion of a spoken word. Consider the following statements:

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<sup>132</sup> For the dating of and an introduction to the text, see Ó Néill (1979). Regarding the usage of *bríathar*, it is worth noting that the author also uses it in the grammatical sense of ‘verb’ (e.g. OIT 253–4, 394–5, 400–4, 465–6, 470–2). Ó Néill (1979: 152–4) commented on the close coexistence of grammar and exegesis in the ‘Old Irish Treatise’.

<sup>133</sup> The Latin quotation is almost verbatim from Gregory: *Quia hoc uerbum quod foris protulit illi uerbo quod intus audierat coniunxit* (Greg. *Hom. in Ezech.* I.ii.2; CCSL 142: 17.32–3). The passage from the ‘Old Irish Treatise’ is revisited in Chapters 5 and 7 (cf. pp. 176, 270).

*Caide bríathar gan son .i. bríathar an sgríbhinn.*

[What is word without sound? i.e. the word of writing].

*Caide bríathar gan guth gan son .i. an compóid mérdha.*

[What is word without voice or sound? i.e. finger-counting (ed. Corthals 2007: 137; my translation)].

Here the author explores different combinations of the four components of fully articulated speech – *cíall, son, guth, bríathar*. When *bríathar* exists without *son* but maintains the *guth*, in which *cíall* is implicitly present, it is a word expressed silently, that is, through writing. A written word still qualifies as a word ‘outside the mouth’ since it fulfils a communicative function, even in the absence of the acoustic aspect of speech. Moreover, writing, though silent, provides a graphic representation of phonological structures and thus preserves the image of *guth*. When both *son* and *guth* are taken out of the equation, *bríathar* assumes the form of gesture, specifically, finger-counting.

It appears that the two statements quoted above became a source for the compiler of O’Davoren’s glossary but were mistakenly conflated in the process: *Briathar cen guth .i. briathar in sgríbhinn nó in compóid merda* ‘A word without voice, that is, a word of writing or finger-counting’ (O’Dav. 285; my translation; cf. *CIH* IV 1477.7). In this entry, Stokes translated *compóid merda* as ‘mad composition’. As John Carey (1990: 40) clarified, Stokes evidently took *merda* to be an adjective synonymous with *mer* ‘insane, crazed, turbulent’. Carey himself, however, convincingly proposed to interpret it as an adjectival derivative of *mér* ‘finger’. This suggestion is based on Dáibhí Ó Cróinín’s (1982: 290–2) comments regarding the term *computus digitorum* attested in Insular computistical texts as a synonym of *computus Graecorum* whereby the letters of the archaic Greek alphabet are used for representing numbers. This numeral system has a transparently decimal foundation and can therefore be conveniently used for counting with fingers.<sup>134</sup>

If finger-counting can be described as a word, it necessarily follows that the conceptual field of *bríathar* is not limited to the sphere of verbal expression but includes other categories of meaningful signs. The one invariable criterion for

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<sup>134</sup> The letters  $\alpha$ – $\theta$  stand for the digits (1–9),  $\iota$ – $\rho$  (*koppa*) for tens (10–90),  $\rho$ – $\tau$  (*sampi*) for hundreds (100–900). On finger-counting in the Greco-Roman world and early medieval Europe, see Williams and Williams (1995). I thank my examiners, Dr Deborah Hayden and Dr Pádraic Moran, for providing me with this reference.

*briathar*, then, is that it has to represent and outwardly communicate certain mental content. Erich Poppe (2016: 76–7) arrived at a similar conclusion:

The ‘word’ therefore has a material aspect, as well as a mental one; the spoken word realizes mind, sound, and voice, the written word realizes mind and voice (but no sound), and the ‘signed’ word realizes mind and gesture (but neither sound nor voice).

This expanded view of what can be considered a *briathar* is not exclusive to *Dliged sésa*. A similar designation of gestures as words of the body can be found in the Milan glosses. The gloss in question is prompted by a cue in the main text which, for the Milan corpus, is the Latin epitome of a Greek commentary on the Psalter by Theodore of Mopsuestia. Theodore offers the following interpretation for Ps. 133:2 *In noctibus extollite manus vestras in sancta et benedicite Domino* ‘Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord’: *Habitus quippe et rationabilis membrorum motus sermo quidam est corporis et praeter animum carnis quoque deuota confessio* ‘Indeed, the posture and rational movement of the limbs is a certain word of the body, and likewise a devout confession of the flesh outside the mind’ (CCSL 88A: 377.10–12). The gloss that accompanies this passage expands on the idea of *sermo corporis* ‘the word of the body’:<sup>135</sup>

*.i. cumgabal inna lam hicrosfigill is sí **briathar lám** insin 7 issí **briathar súle** dano a cumgabal suas dochum n dáe 7 issi **briathar glunæ** 7 chos a filliud fri slechtan 7 issí **briathar choirp** dano intan roichther do dia ocslechtan 7 chrosigill.*

[i.e. the raising of the hands in cross-vigil, that is **the word of the hands**, and **the word of the eyes**, moreover, is the raising of them up to God, and **the word of the knees** and of the legs is the bending of them in prostration, and **the word of the body**, moreover, is when it is extended to God in prostration and cross-vigil (Ml. 138a2)].

The devotional gestures listed here share an important quality with each other and with finger-counting of *Dliged sésa*: all of them express specific thoughts, intentions or mental states and, on this account, can be figuratively designated as ‘words’. We may conclude from the foregoing that the conceptual field of *briathar* extends beyond the formal criteria that have been discussed at the beginning of this chapter and while it is primarily understood as a lexical, phonetic and orthographic entity, it also covers other types of meaning-bearing signs produced by humans.

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<sup>135</sup> On gestures as *verba visibilia* in Augustine’s theory of signs, see n. 219 below.

We can now address the second part of the definition, where it is suggested that it is a *bríathar* ‘when it differentiates something’ (*an tan dheachraighis ní*). As mentioned earlier, this remark appears to be in contrast with what is said about *epert*, namely that it ‘does not differentiate anything’ (*ni defrigh ní*). The two verbs used here – *dechraigidir* and *deithbrigid* – appear to be synonymous and are formed from nouns that both mean ‘distinction’ or ‘difference’: *dechor* and *deithbir* respectively. Pierre-Yves Lambert (2003) discussed at length the concept of distinction in early Irish literature. He observed that there is often a particular need in the glosses and glossaries to distinguish between words that are similar in form and/or sense and that for this purpose a robust terminology of differentiation was developed. Lambert (2003: 117) further pointed out that *dechor*, together with its verb *dechraigidir*, was an older term and was eventually replaced with *deithbir* and its derivatives. While he did not mention *Dliged sésa*, where the two verbs are attested side by side, he suggested that *deithbir* (and by extension *deithbrigid*) found early use in legal commentaries where it was par for the course to multiply distinctions between words to avoid ambiguity (Lambert 2003: 107). Among them, one can count ‘O’Davoren’s Glossary’ where the term *deithbir* is leveraged to make minute lexical distinction between groups of synonyms or near synonyms (Lambert 2003: 114–16). This logic also applies to the entire passage from *Dliged sésa* which started this discussion as it pursues the same goal of painstakingly defining terms which may otherwise appear interchangeable.

Thus the concept of differentiation in the glossaries appears to be primarily based on semantic criteria and serves the purpose of disentangling word-meanings. There is, however, another significant area where ‘distinctions’ play a key role – grammatical analysis. So, for example, Lambert (2003: 108–10) noted that in the St Gall glosses the term *dechor*, abundantly used, may refer to distinguishing words by such criteria as part of speech (Sg. 220b6=220b29w), gender (61a24=61a38kk), person (202a4=202a13l), tense and mood (146b15=146b19bb) or pronunciation (6b2=6b6d, 23a2=23a10e). Unlike in the glossaries, the focus is on the formal differences between words rather than on signification: the difference of meaning is a consequence of morphological and phonological changes.

A similar idea is expressed in the *Auraicept* with the help of a different term – *etargaire*, likewise meaning ‘distinction’. A lengthy passage introduces ‘seven distinctions’ (*secht n-eatargaire*) which include three categories pertaining to the

adjectival degrees of comparison, two to the gender of personal pronouns and two to the subject and object marking in verbs (*Auraic*. 639–59). Paul Russell (2020: 55–61) offered an insightful analysis of the entire passage and suggested that the elusive term *etargaire* ‘could be argued to refer to a category in which markers are added to a basic form to make a series of distinctions’.<sup>136</sup> In other words, *etargaire* helps to account for inflectional morphology.

These formal differences necessarily result in differences of meaning. I would like to draw attention to the phrasing used for the category *etargoiri in incoisc i persainn* ‘distinction of meaning in a person’ which is later also described as *sloinniudh persainni saindredaigi* ‘the denoting of a particular person’ (*Auraic*. 848–9).<sup>137</sup> The words *inchosc* ‘indication, sign, signification’ and *slondud*, the verbal noun of the already familiar verb *sluindid* ‘to signify’ drive home the point that morphological changes to the base-form considerably affect its meaning. An example of this offered in the text is the group *unnse* ‘behold him’, *unnsi* ‘behold her’, *onnar* ‘behold it’ where the verb *uindim* ‘I see’ is modified by demonstrative particles which transform its deictic meaning (cf. O’Brien 1932: 162–3; Russell 1999b: 203–4 n. 2). Thus Lambert’s (2003: 117) conclusion regarding the usage of *etargaire* in the *Auraicept* seems fitting: *C’est tout à la fois la variation formelle obtenue par la flexion ou la dérivation, et la variation sémantique qui permet d’isoler les mots en les distinguant les uns par rapport aux autres* ‘It is both the formal variation obtained by inflection or derivation, and the semantic variation which makes it possible to isolate words by distinguishing them from one another.’ Thus, *etargaire* presupposes a view of meaning that is sensitive to morphological transformations.

With the above considerations in mind, it is possible to make a suggestion concerning the difference between *epert* and *bríathar* on the basis of their ability to

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<sup>136</sup> For additional comments on the term *etargaire*, see Ahlqvist (1983: 42–4), Lambert (2003: 116–8), Ahlqvist (2016: 107), Russell (2020: 65–7). Anticipating the discussion of Irish etymological practice in Chapter 4, I would like to make a note of the etymology of *etargaire* provided in the *Auraicept*: *etargnaghudh gotha a inne* ‘interpreting of voice is its meaning’ (*Auraic*. 845). This is an example of a ‘separated’ etymology (cf. pp. 149–54 below) whereby the two parts of the compound, *etar-* and *gaire*, are linked to other unrelated but similar-sounding words. In this case, the prefix *etar-* ‘between’ is traced back to *etargnugud* ‘interpreting’ which does, indeed, contain the same prefix but is not otherwise related to *etargaire*. The second element, *gaire* ‘proclamation, calling’, owing to the vague similarity of meaning, is interpreted as *guth* ‘voice’ or ‘speech sound’. This etymology is meant to elucidate the meaning of *etargaire* by drawing on the information contained within the word itself. While it may seem clumsy or nonsensical to the modern reader, it achieves its goal and emphasises the idea that *etargaire* helps distinguish between the semantic nuances of word-forms. Note also the use of the term *inne* here as an etymological meaning (cf. pp. 157–61).

<sup>137</sup> On the use of *inchosc* in the *Auraicept*, see Acken (2008: 98–100).

'differentiate' something or lack thereof. It appears, then, that *epert*, which is said to not distinguish anything, may be the word as a lemma or the base form. This may, in a way, be corroborated by the implicit association of *epert* with the noun (*ainmm*) which, as has been mentioned, is the part of speech most commonly found as a headword in glossaries, usually in the nominative form (cf. pp. 98–9). It is not so much a word in use as it is the idea of a word: it possesses well-defined form and a complete meaning but lacks the properties that would allow it to participate in syntactic constructions. *Bríathar*, on the other hand, is capable of making distinctions and can therefore act as a functional syntactic element of discourse. This view of *bríathar* also helps explain its wider sphere of application which extends beyond verbal expression to other types of meaningful signs that express certain propositional content of thought.

While we should not expect the minutiae of these definitions to be followed and maintained in sources other than *Dliged sésa*, *bríathar* does serve as the more universal term for 'word' across multiple texts. So, for example, it is attested in 16 glosses in the Würzburg corpus, in 41 glosses in the Milan corpus and in 40 glosses in St Gall. It is worth noting that in the latter, due to its grammatical focus, *bríathar* in almost all its occurrences (37 glosses out of 40) is used in the technical sense 'verb', by analogy with Latin *verbum*. In Würzburg and Milan, however, it is predominantly used in two senses: as a collective term for speech or utterance, regardless of its length (in which it is similar to *aisnéis* and to Latin *sermo*) and in a theological sense as a calque on *verbum Dei* 'word of God' – *bríathar Dé*.<sup>138</sup> The usage of *bríathar* as 'speech' or generally as verbal expression of thought is exemplified in such phrases as *nabriathrasa forcane* 'the words that thou teachest' (Wb. 28c221), *briathra abelaichthi* 'flattering words' (Ml. 74a6), *briathar in popuil* 'word of the people' (Ml. 114d13). The notion of the word of God is a more complex one and, although it does seem to be similarly based on the collective sense of *verbum/bríathar*, it has more pronounced cognitive implications and relates closely to ideas about inner speech which will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter 7. Nevertheless, these more generalised usages still largely conform to the key criterion proposed in *Dliged sésa*, namely that *bríathar* is an active constituent of speech due to its morphological and syntactic flexibility.

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<sup>138</sup> Examples of *bríathar* in connection to the word of God are Wb. 4d6, 24d22, 29a12, 31a9; Ml. 30c16, 31c7, 39a12, 146a1.

As a last remark on *bríathar*, it is worth considering comments which emphasise its shortness, thus implying that it represents a standalone word rather than more extensive utterances. In *De origine scoticae linguae* we find the following etymology of *bríathar*: *Bríathor .i. brí 7 rethor .i. breuis 7 orator. Bríathor insce apud Eoles ‘Bríathor “word”, i.e. brí and rethor, i.e. [Lat.] breuis “brief” and [Lat.] orator. Bríathor [βρήτωρ] means speech in Aeolic’ (DOSL 159–60). Here, the lemma is broken up into two elements *brí-* and *-athor* which are then identified as Latin words *breuis* ‘short’ and *rethor* which, according to Pádraic Moran (2019: 338–9), should perhaps be emended to *oratio* ‘speech’ so that the resulting explanation would be ‘short utterance’ rather than ‘short speaker’. It is then reinforced by the suggestion that there is a Greek homonym to *bríathar* that means ‘speech’ (*insce*).<sup>139</sup> It appears that by qualifying it as a short utterance, the entry leans towards understanding *bríathar* as a standalone word.*

Similar logic is applied in the Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter:

*Ceist. Cia torbatu frisind-airnechta argumenti? Ní anse. Do aissnéis inna céille dochoscethar tria cumbri m-bríathar, ut dicit Isidorus: ‘Argumenta sunt quae causas rerum ostendunt. Ex breuitate sermonum longum sensum habent.*

[Question. For what use were arguments invented? Not difficult. To set forth through short words the sense which follows, *ut dicit Isidorus*: ‘Arguments show the causes of things. They have a long sense from the brevity of words’ (OIT 255–61; translation modified)].

The author of the ‘Old Irish Treatise’ likewise chooses to define *bríathar* in terms of its shortness by using the word *cuimbre* ‘brevity, shortness’ (*eDIL*, s.v.) which creates an interplay, if unintentional, with etymologising *brí-* as *breuis* in *DOSL* and which is also reprised in the pseudo-Isidorean Latin quotation with the phrase *ex breuitate sermonum* ‘from the brevity of words’.<sup>140</sup> Also noteworthy in this passage is the use of *aisnéis*: the short words are the building blocks that constitute the ‘setting forth’ or the expression of the sense.<sup>141</sup> Thus the schema proposed in *Dliged sésa*, or at least a part of it, obtains here.

<sup>139</sup> Moran (2019: 339) argues for the Aeolic form *βρήτωρ* ‘orator’ as the form likely intended by the author of the entry.

<sup>140</sup> The statement ascribed to Isidore does not belong to him but occurs in similar wording and with a reference to Hilary of Poitiers in the contemporary Hiberno-Latin texts *Eclogae Tractatorum in Psalterium: Argumenta sunt quae causas ostendunt ex breuitate sermonum longumque sensum habent* (ed. McNamara 1973: 287). On this text, see McNamara (1973: 225–7).

<sup>141</sup> The relationship between the two is akin to that between *verbum* and *sermo* in Latin, as postulated by Isidore: *Verbum unius pars orationis est, iuxta grammaticos. Nam sermo plurimorum verborum oratio est. Sermo autem a serendo dictus, quod nos cum praepositione dicimus a disserendo.* ‘Verbum is

## *Focal*

A common vernacular term for ‘word’ which is absent from the catalogue of types of linguistic expression in *Dliged sésa* is *focal*. Interestingly, it is not at all favoured in the Old Irish glosses, with a mere three attestations in the Milan corpus and only one in St Gall. However, the opposite is the case for the *Auraicept*, where it is by far the preferred term with over 70 occurrences.

In his discussion of *focal* in the *Auraicept*, Erich Poppe (2016: 71–4; cf. Bronner et al. 2018: 58–60) identified two main usages of the term: as a lexical word and as a stress-group comprised of a phonological word and its clitics. He noted, however, that the latter usage is limited to one example, namely the ‘longest word in Irish’ (*focul is mo isan Gaedilc*) which is the octosyllabic *anrocomrai[rc]nicsiumairne* (*Auraic*. 1435–6).<sup>142</sup> Poppe (2016: 71) provided a full analysis of this form:

This is a first plural preterite of *comroircnigid* ‘errs, makes mistakes’, based on the verbal noun *comrorcun* of a compound verb \*com-ar-org-, with augment *ro* as conjunct particle, the (proclitic) prepositional relative ‘in which’ (or perhaps the demonstrative relative ‘that which’), and a first plural pronominal clitic (*nota augens*): *an-ro-comraircnicsiumair-ne* ‘in which we have erred’.

Poppe also added that the categorisation of this rather complex formation as a word can be compared to the nominal paradigms of the *Auraicept* where the combination of a preposition and a noun is perceived as a single unit (cf. pp. 88–90 above). Regarding these paradigms, it has been concluded earlier that they do not appear to fully represent the theoretical understanding of the notion of ‘word’ by early Irish scholars. Moreover, even our modern terminology may fail us here: should the hyphenated spelling *an-ro-comraircnicsiumair-ne* which accords with current conventions not be considered a single word?

The meaning ‘lexical word’ can be inferred from the contexts which concern the lexicon of a language as a whole such as *na focail berlai na athgenmar* ‘the words

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a part of a single utterance, according to grammarians. *Sermo*, however, is an utterance of many *uerba*. For *sermo* is so called from linking together (*a serendo*) which we call, with a preposition, from examining (*a disserendo*)’ (Isid. *Diff.* I.578; *PL* 83: 67B).

<sup>142</sup> This is one of two examples provided, the second being the nominal compound *fiannamailcecheterdarai* translated aptly into German by Thurneysen (1928: 277) as *Kriegerschaftsfreundschaften* ‘military friendships’ (*Auraic*. 1435–6, 1739–40). Poppe (2016: 71–2) admitted that this example is ‘less interesting’ as it fits the category of lexical word.



of a language which we do not know' (*Auraic*. 602). In a well-known passage, the author(s) boast that, compared to Latin, the Irish language is *leithiu a ciallaibh 7 foclaib 7 litrib* 'broader in respect of meanings, words, and letters' (*Auraic*. 1079). A list of examples contains vernacular lexical items for which there are no exact Latin equivalents such as *grus* 'curds', *cloch* 'stone', *lind* 'pool'. Then a counter-argument is proposed according to which Latin lexical items, due to being fewer in number, carry more meanings than the Irish ones:

*Leithiu didiu in Gaedel i foclaibh 7 i llitribh desin anda in Laitneoir. Is ed asbeir in Laitneoir cid leithiu i foclaib 7 i llitrib in Gaedelc, ni leithe i ciallaibh; ar cia bet ilanmann icon Gaedel ic sluinn na raet, tic in chiall relait asin uathadh fogul fil icon Laitneoir.*

[Hence, then, the Gael is wider in words and letters than the Latinist. What the Latinist says is that though Gaelic is wider in words and letters, it is not wider in meanings; for though the Gael has many names in denoting the things, the relative meaning emerges out of the paucity of words which the Latinist does have (*Auraic*. 1094–8)].

In this passage, the plural *focla* refers to the entire lexicons of Irish and Latin. Interestingly, *focal* here appears to be understood in a way in which *epert* is defined in *Dliged sésa*. The vocabulary is similar as the *Auraicept* passage talks about names (*anmann*) that signify (*ic sluinn*) things. Thus it is not morphologically flexible words (viz. *bríathar*) that are discussed here but the static base-forms, the lemmata that constitute the *Wortschatz* of a language.

The usage 'lexical word' is further reflected in a group of passages that inquire about the properties of a specific word, for instance:

*Caide ruidhles 7 dileas 7 coitchind 7 indles in focail is guta?*

[What are peculiar, proper, common, and improper of the word vowel? (*Auraic*. 380–1)].

*Coitchend 7 diles 7 ruidhles conadar don focul is seachta.*

[Common, proper, and peculiar are asked for the word heptad (*Auraic*. 745–6)].<sup>143</sup>

At the same time, *focal* often refers to word-as-form and it may describe words as collections of letters. So, for example, a scheme of linguistic ascent is proposed in the

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<sup>143</sup> See also *Auraic*. 316, 322, 1736. For a discussion of the possible connection between the vernacular terms *ruidles*, *diles* and *coitchenn* and Boethius' logical terminology in his commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*, see Poppe (1999b: 199). The use of logical categories in Hiberno-Latin grammatical discourse is also discussed in Chapter 4 (pp. 142–5).

*Auraicept* whereby vowels and consonants are converted into letters and *doaitneat .i, taitnit asna litrib sin i foclaib* ‘shine, i.e. out of these letters into words’ (*Auraic.* 334). It continues further as *dotiaghat asna foclaib sin i comighib 7 i sreathaibh roscaigh 7 fasaigh 7 airchetail* ‘they come out of those words into texts, series of proverbs and maxims, poetic composition’ (*Auraic.* 336–7; translation modified). Another comment states that the material of the words (*damna na focul*) is cut out of consonants, specifically the Ogam consonants the special term for which – *taebomnai* – is etymologised as *toba damna* ‘cutting of material’ (*Auraic.* 414–20).

Just as with *epert* and *bríathar*, the length of a *focul* is also considered among its properties. It is listed alongside its *inne* ‘meaning’ or ‘quality’,<sup>144</sup> and the phrasing here is interesting: *Is e in met co fester in met no in laighet bis isin focul. Is i in inni co fester inni uilc no maithiusa bis fond focul* ‘That is the size, so that the greatness or smallness which is in the word might be known. That is the quality, so that it might be known whether it is a quality of evil or good that is under the word’ (*Auraic.* 1903–5; translation modified). The two statements follow the same overall structure but differ slightly: the greatness of a word is said to be contained ‘in’ it (*isin focul*) while its quality is placed ‘under’ it (*fond focul*). The latter construction with the preposition *fo* ‘under’ is already familiar to us from a gloss in St Gall where the substance (*folad*) is said to be put under the phonological word (*fondsun*).<sup>145</sup> Another similar construction is attested in the Würzburg corpus: *inni bess fonfogursin* ‘the sense which is under that sound’.<sup>146</sup> It is noteworthy that three texts of different origin and date of composition all turn to this exact construction to represent the relationship between meaning and form, suggesting that the idea of sense literally underlying the word-form was not an uncommon strategy for conceptualising the notion of signification. This view has some conventionalist implications as meaning is thought not to reside within a word but to be associated with it externally. The size of a word, on the other hand, is a property that is inherent within the word-form as seems to be suggested by the phrase *met no in laighet bis isin focul* ‘greatness or smallness which is in the word’ construed with the preposition *i* ‘in’.

<sup>144</sup> On *inne* as a vernacular equivalent to Latin *qualitas*, see Chapter 4 (pp. 160–1).

<sup>145</sup> Sg. 73b3=73b11e. See p. 40 above.

<sup>146</sup> The full gloss reads: *.i. ni ɔfil tra belre issin cenfogur .i. cetorbe dúibsi didiu infogur sin mani fessid inni bess fonfogursin* ‘i.e. there is not, then, a language in this world without sound, that is, what profit to you then (is) this sound unless ye know the sense which is under that sound?’ (Wb. 12d5).

The lack of specificity in the phrase ‘greatness or smallness’ suggests that the compilers of the *Auraicept* did not impose any defined boundaries on the expected size of a *focal*. One might also remember that it was the term used to refer to the longest word – *focul is mó* – in Irish and Latin (*Auraic.* 1435). On the contrary, other sources hint that *focal* may have been seen as a shorter linguistic unit. Note the abundance of diminutive suffixes in the etymology of the word offered in *De origine scoticae linguae: Focul, i.e. a uocula, uocula a uoce; foclán didiu guthán* ‘Focal “word”, i.e. from [Lat.] *uocula* ‘word’ from *uox* ‘voice’; *foclán*, then, means a word’ (*DOSL* 552–3).<sup>147</sup> Thus vernacular *focul* is connected to Latin *vocula*, literally ‘little voice’ or ‘little word’, a diminutive form of *vox*. The author drives home the point by explaining it with two nonce-words *foclán* (by analogy with *vocula*) and *guthán* (from *guth*) formed with the help of the diminutive suffix *-án* as a parallel to Latin *-ula* (Moran 2019: 459). While the pairing of *focal* and *vocula* may be simply intended to manufacture a formal parallel between languages, the two vernacular *ad hoc* formations put deliberate emphasis on the idea of smallness or brevity. This interpretation, to some degree, plays into the understanding of *focal* as a lexical word rather than more complex units of speech, at least in grammatical discourse.<sup>148</sup>

One of the reasons why the term *focal* is so ubiquitous in the *Auraicept* compared to, for example, the gloss-corpora may be the text’s connections to vernacular poetic and legal traditions (Ahlqvist 1983: 11–14; Hayden 2011). *Focal* is also the preferred term in a number of such works. So, for example, in the ‘Old Irish Tract on Satire’, one of the ten subtypes of *aircetal* ‘incantation’ is *focal i frithsuidhiu* ‘word in opposition’: *Focal i frithsuidhiu dono .i. comarc molta, 7 facabhair focal ann for brú aíre* “‘Word in opposition’ next, viz. a quatrain of praise, and therein is found a word on the verge of satire’ (OITS 9; ed. and trans. Meroney 1950: 202, 205). The term *focal i frithsuidhiu* thus refers to a type of poetic composition where a quatrain of praise is subverted by one word of satire.<sup>149</sup> Here, however, the boundary between *focal* as a standalone word and *focal* as a longer stretch of speech begins to get blurred since a single word is usually not enough to express the propositional

<sup>147</sup> A similar etymology is found in *Sanas Cormaic: Focal quasi uocalum .i. guthan* (Corm. Y 621).

<sup>148</sup> In this regard, note also the compound *oenfocal* ‘single word’ used on five occasions in the *Auraicept* (*Auraic.* 87–8, 1260, 1318, 1559, 1721).

<sup>149</sup> It is discussed in some detail by Meroney (1950: 209) and McLaughlin (2008: 73–4) who also provide references to its other attestations, including one in the *Auraicept* (1933).

meaning required to make a statement about a person.<sup>150</sup> Similar logic can be applied to a genre of poetical composition known as *trefocal*. Liam Breatnach (2017: 2) suggested that it can be rendered literally as ‘three words’ or ‘three utterances’ and denotes a ‘a poem of warning which mixes praise and satire’. He further explained: “The three “utterances” are three essential items which must be included in such a composition, viz. specifying the offence, naming the offender, and praise of the person to whom the warning is directed’ (Breatnach 2017: 2).<sup>151</sup> From this it is clear that a *focal*, in this context, must be larger than just one word. A rather ambiguous notion of *focal* also serves as a unit of measurement for legal statements whose length depends on the status of the speaker:

*.i. i nanalaib [...]: fot naenanala do boaire 7 .u. focuil inti, a do do filid 7 .x. focail indtib, a tri do flaith 7 focal ar .xx.it indtib, a secht do eclais 7 nai focail .xl.at indtib (CIH III 856.5–7).*

[that is, in respect of breaths [...]: the length of a single breath for a freeman and five words [are to be articulated] in it (the breath), two [breaths] for a poet and ten words [are to be articulated] in them, and three [breaths] for a lord and twenty-one words [are to be articulated] in them, and seven [breaths] for a church[man] and forty-nine words [are to be articulated] in them (trans. Stacey 2007: 76)].

Robin Chapman Stacey translated *focal* as ‘word’ in this passage. Thus freemen and poets are allowed to utter five words per inhalation while lords and clerics are entitled to seven words per breath. George Calder opted for the same interpretation in his rendering of a similar statement in the *Auraicept: uair is coic focail romesadh i n-anail in filed* ‘for five words are adjudged to be a breath of the poet’ (*Auraic.* 931). Breatnach collected several comparable passages from legal tracts but chose to translate *focal* as ‘phrase’. He cites a passage from *Bretha Nemed Toísech*:

*Fuirmither cóic foclaiib fír féine [...] Lánfiche focal áe ríge rúanaid; réde co téora hanála a derbdliged; dí anáil do écius [...] cóic fír féine, deich fír láedo.*

[Let there be fixed in five phrases the attestation of commoners, [...] A full twenty phrases is the suit of a powerful king; elucidation extending to three

<sup>150</sup> While it is theoretically possible to subvert an entire statement with a single word, e.g. by adding one harsh adjective among flattering ones, the poetic examples provided in the treatise itself utilise entire statements for this purpose (cf. OITS 9; ed. and trans. Meroney 1950: 202, 205).

<sup>151</sup> On the procedure of issuing a *trefocal* and examples of such poems, see Breatnach (2004; 2006), Stacey (2007: 112–17). As a legal practice, *trefocal* is a prominent concept in the *Bretha Nemed* tradition (cf. Breatnach 2004).

breathings is his certain right. Two breathings for a poet [...] five [phrases] for the man of the commoners, ten for the man of a *laíd* (viz. the poet)].<sup>152</sup>

Both ways to translate *focal* have their merits. Rendering it as ‘word’ reflects the usage of the *Auraicept* as well as the emphasis on the small size of a *focal* in the glossaries. At the same time, translating it as ‘phrase’ or ‘utterance’ corresponds better to the understanding of *focal* in the context of poetic composition and legal procedures. It appears that, like *bríathar*, the meaning of *focal* is on a sliding scale between narrower denotation of a single word to broader implications of a spoken utterance.

#### *Hiberno-Latin Terminology of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus*

Until now, only passing remarks have been made on the Latin vocabulary for ‘word’. We have briefly touched upon Augustine’s scheme in *De dialectica* derived from the Stoic doctrine; a few words have been said about Priscian’s concept of *dictio* which was absorbed by Irish grammarians; and *verbum* has been noted as a general and multi-purpose term.<sup>153</sup> The writings of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus offer a rare opportunity to explore this established terminology, in addition to his own lexical inventions, in the context of Hiberno-Latin tradition.

This topic has been previously investigated by Vivien Law (1995: 18–21) who suggested that one of the principles guiding Virgilius’ use of existing and novel linguistic terminology was the desire to distinguish between corporeal and incorporeal aspects of language. Regarding the notion of ‘word’, she observed that ‘Virgilius distinguishes clearly and methodically between the word considered as a semantic entity – *uerbum* – and the word considered as a physical or formal unit – *fonum*’ (Law 1995: 18).<sup>154</sup> This is an intriguing observation that merits a brief discussion.

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<sup>152</sup> Presented as part of Breatnach’s 2014 Statutory Public Lecture for the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. This passage with translation is quoted by Poppe (2016: 73). For the original text, see *CIH* VI 2225.27–9.

<sup>153</sup> A more thorough discussion of terminology for ‘word’ in Latin grammatical tradition can be found in Hyman (2005).

<sup>154</sup> Law also noted that Virgilius applies similar corporeal/incorporeal binary to the idea of ‘sentence’. Here, he uses the standard grammatical term *sententia* in contexts where the semantic content of an utterance is concerned. To refer to the sentence as a formal unit, he repurposes the term *testimonium* and invents his own term *quassum* (Law 1995: 19–20). Bengt Löfstedt (1982b: 100) suggested that Virgilius’ thought process in creating the word *quassum* might have been inspired by the etymology *verbum*, which was commonly thought to derive from *verberare* ‘to beat, to strike’. Similarly, *quassum* could come from the synonymous verb *quatere* ‘to shake, to agitate’.

Regarding Virgilius' use of *verbum*, it should be pointed out that in most cases it refers to 'verb' as a technical term. However, on several occasions it does connote 'word' as a semantic entity, as, for instance, in the etymology of *sapientia* 'wisdom': *Sapientia autem ex sapore sic nominantur, quia [...] in animae motu quidam sapor est [...] qui uerborum sententiarumque uim discernat* 'Wisdom is so called from taste (*ex sapore*) because [...] there is a certain [sense of] taste to the motion of the soul [...] which discerns the force of words and sentences' (Virg. *Epit.* I.7–10). In this context, *verbum* and *sententia* are presented as semantic entities, presumably with *verbum* being the smallest unit of meaning and *sententia* representing a complete utterance.

The picture, however, loses much of its clarity when Virgilius attempts to make a distinction between a number of quasi-synonymous terms:

*Quid interest inter uerbum et sermonem et sententiam et loquelam orationemque? 'Verbum' est omne, quod lingua profertur et uoce; 'sermo' autem, cuius nomen ex duobus uerbis conpositum est, hoc est serendo et monendo, comptior ac diligentior fit; 'sententia' uero, quae sensu concipitur; porro 'loquela' est, quando cum quadam eloquentia dictionis ordo protexitur; 'oratio' est, quando usque ad manuum artem describendi oratorius sermo perueniat* (Virg. *Epit.* XII.11–20).

[What is the difference between *verbum*, *sermo*, *sententia*, *loquela* and *oratio*? A *verbum* is everything that is produced with tongue and voice; *sermo*, however, whose name is composed of two words (*uerbis*), that is 'linking together' (*serendum*) and 'reminding' (*monendum*), is better arranged and more accurate; *sententia*, however, [is that] which is conceived by the sense; then, it is a *loquela* when the order of *dictio* is weaved together with certain eloquence; *oratio* is when the oratorical *sermo* arrives at the art of hand-writing (?)].

The distinctions introduced in this passage are rather fine on the one hand but blur the line between a singular word and more complex utterances as each of the five terms defined appears to refer to speech in general. Moreover, the definition of *verbum* offered here presents it in more mechanical terms and as the most primitive type of expression.<sup>155</sup> Slightly above it is *sermo*, whose etymology is partly based on Isidore (cf. n. 141) and which might be understood as syntactic construction since it refers to the 'linking together' of words (*serendo*) and to their arrangement

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<sup>155</sup> Although *vox* in this passage could be understood in the incorporeal sense discussed in Chapter 1. In his etymology of *verbum*, Virgilius compares *lingua* and *vox* to the body and soul of the word respectively: '*Verbum' igitur duobus ex modis constat: 'uer' ex uerbere, quod lingua guttori infligit, 'bum' ex bucino, quod uox reboat; nam sicut homo ex corpore constat et anima, ita et uerbum ex lingua et uoce* 'Therefore, *verbum* consists of two parts: *uer* from *uerber* 'whip', because the tongue strikes against the throat, *bum* from *bucina* 'trumpet', because the voice resounds; for just as man consists of body and soul, so the *verbum* consists of the tongue and the voice' (Virg. *Epit.* VII.15–18).

(*comptior*). It is only on the level of *sententia* that meaning (*sensus*) is explicitly acknowledged as a contributing factor. The remaining two entities, *loquela* and *oratio*, seem to be concerned with rhetorical merits of speech.

Another noteworthy detail about this passage is the use of *dictio*. It does not receive its own definition but appears in the phrase *dictionis ordo* in the definition of *loquela* which can be translated, like the other terms in this passage, as ‘speech’ or ‘utterance’. The use of *dictio* in the singular suggests that it should not be understood as one word but rather more abstractly as ‘speaking’ or ‘locution’. This is the sense in which Virgilius uses *dictio* most frequently. Interestingly, out of total 22 attestations of the term *dictio* in *Epistolae* and *Epitomae*, ten, that is almost a half, are in chapters dedicated to conjunction (Virg. *Epist.* VI; *Epit.* IX.121–76). This is significant because it allows us to narrow down the meaning of *dictio* to a syntactic unit within a sentence which is connected to other similar units by means of a conjunction. This syntactic unit can be understood as a clause or a single word, depending on the structure of a given sentence. Malcolm Hyman (2005: 162–4) observed similar use of *dictio* among Latin grammarians prior to Priscian, specifically in Charisius and Donatus, and proposed that it may be understood as a ‘syntagmatic group’ which is close to Virgilius’ position.

But let us look at a few examples of Virgilius’ *dictio*:

(a) *Tali etenim modo haec particula coniungit et conglutinat dictiones ac sententias.*

[In fact, this small part [of speech] connects and glues together *dictiones* and sentences in a similar way’ (Virg. *Epist.* VI.6–7)].

(b) *Quae nullius ordinis sunt: iterum paulatim saltim; non enim ad ordinem dictionis, sed ad qualitatem sensus attinent.*

[[Conjunctions] which do not belong to any group: ‘again’ (*iterum*), ‘gradually’ (*paulatim*), ‘at any rate’ (*saltim*); for they pertain not to the order of *dictio* but to the quality of the sense’ (Virg. *Epist.* VI.90–2)].

(c) *Expletiuae autem duas ob causas sic uocantur; primam quod sensum dictionis expleant [...].*

[However, expletive [conjunctions] are called so on account of two reasons: first, because they fill out (*expleant*) the sense of a *dictio* [...] (Virg. *Epit.* IX.135–6)].

(d) *Inter ‘autem’ et ‘enim’ hoc distat, quia ‘autem’ dictionum sensum commutat ac discernit, ‘enim’ conglutinat.*

[The difference between *autem* and *enim* is that *autem* modifies and separates the sense of *dictiones*, *enim* glues it together (Virg. *Epit.* IX.140–2)].

These examples show that *dictio*, for Virgilius, has syntactic connotations and, in most cases, refers not to a single word but to a clause. There is some ambiguity in this regard in (a) as the *dictiones* glued together by conjunctions can be understood as both words and phrases within a sentence. In passage (b), Virgilius describes the function of a group of unclassified conjunctions as modifying the sense of a phrase or a sentence, rather than affecting its *ordo dictionis*. Here *dictio* is used in the singular which confirms that it is not to be understood as the order of separate words but pertains to the overall syntactic structure of a phrase or, to use Hyman's term, of a syntagmatic group. Examples (c) and (d) both make a reference to the sense (*sensum*) of a *dictio*, and it is clear from the context that they refer to the meaning of an entire phrase or clause in a complex sentence.

Thus Virgilius' use of *dictio* is rather different from Priscian's and from Irish grammarians' use of *epert* which in many cases functioned as a semantic loan from the Latin term. This may be explained by Virgilius' early date (mid-seventh century) when Priscian had not yet entered the mainstream of early medieval grammar.<sup>156</sup>

We can now turn to consider the term highlighted by Vivien Law – *fonum*, Virgilius' own invention. The word itself quite transparently alludes to Greek *φωνή* 'voice' thus creating an alternative to Latin *vox*. If this is so, Virgilius' understanding of *vox* again differs from that of later Irish grammarians. Instead of the combined phonological material of a language (the meaning advanced by Donatus and Priscian), here it rather refers to word as a phonological shape – the usage serviced by the vernacular term *son* (cf. pp. 38–45). In Latin tradition, this approach to *vox* dominates in the writings of Varro and Quintilian (Hyman 2005: 158–62). However, Virgilius appears to have stumbled upon this parallel by accident as the attestations of the term *vox* itself in his writings do not reflect this usage.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> The re-discovery of Priscian's *Ars grammaticae* is often associated with the work of Alcuin around the turn of the ninth century (Gibson 1992: 17–18; Law 2003: 145). While it has been suggested that Priscian might have been known and used in Ireland already in the seventh century (Strachan 1903: 470–1; Hofman 1988: 806), the *apparatus fontium* provided by Bengt Löfstedt (2003) to his edition of Virgilius's works only lists two parallels with Priscian. Donatus, in comparison, is referenced over twenty times.

<sup>157</sup> Curiously, however, Virgilius does mention both Varro and Quintilian by name, although, as Law (1989: 160) noted, the statements with which they are credited are not found in their extant works. For the mentions of Quintilian, see Virg. *Epist.* II.179; of Varro – Virg. *Epit.* IV.29, VIII.75, X.145.



Nevertheless, Law (1988: 129) observed that Virgilius' *fonum* 'designates the word in its phonic aspect – the word as a physical entity that can be “measured” or “scrambled” or extended by a letter or syllable [...] or be confused with another one'. Before giving examples of its application, it is worth surveying its attestations. Virgilius uses the term *fonum* 31 times in total: three of them in the *Epistolae* and the rest in the *Epitomae*. As with *dictio*, the distribution is also telling. Fourteen – almost half – of its occurrences are found in the tenth epitome *De scinderatione fonorum* 'On the scrambling of words'. In it, Virgilius describes various ways to intentionally obscure the meaning of words and statements by mixing up the order of letters, syllables and words. From this it is already possible to hypothesise that *fonum* is more than a strictly phonological entity and that it relies heavily on orthography. A further seven attestations of *fonum* occur in the fourth epitome *De metris* 'On metre' which suggests that, similarly to the vernacular *focal*, *fonum* plays a role as a unit in poetic composition. The final significant cluster of four attestations is found in the twelfth epitome *De catalogo grammaticorum* 'On the catalogue of grammarians' where the twelve varieties of Latin are introduced. Here, *fonum* is used to refer to the fantastical new 'words' that are said to belong to different varieties. In total, these three groups account for 25 out of 31 attestations.

The practice of *scinderatio fonorum* is one of the many idiosyncratic aspects of Virgilius' teaching. However, it is not without precedent in Latin grammatical tradition. As Vivien Law (1989: 165) observed, parallels to it can be found in ancient etymological techniques starting from *Cratylus* and were reinvented for medieval readers by Isidore. For example, splitting up a word and interpreting the parts separately is a strategy which Virgilius reverses to demonstrate how two words (*fona*) can be merged into one using their first syllables: thus, *ordo* and *fides* produce a new word *orfi* (Virg. *Epit.* X.164–8). Other methods of Virgilian *scinderatio*, including changing the order of verses in a poem and the order of words in a sentence, may have their roots in the stylistic device of hyperbaton (Law 1989: 165–6).<sup>158</sup>

But the type of *scinderatio* that is more pertinent to the present discussion is the 'scrambling' which occurs within the confines of a word, that is, mixing up letters and syllables. One example of it is when letters within one word (*fonum*) can be

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<sup>158</sup> Similar comments on the parallels between obscuration techniques in Irish vernacular tradition and the stylistic teachings of Latin grammar were made by Deborah Hayden (2011: 17).

rearranged to compose other words, such as *nomen* can produce *nemo* ‘nobody’, *mone* ‘warn!’, *en* ‘behold!’ or *ne* ‘in order not to’ (Virg. *Epit.* X.58–62). Another way a *fonum* can be modified is when syllables are added or omitted from words without changing their meaning. For this, Virgilius gives examples that comply with standard Latin grammar (*rogauisse* and *rogasse*) as well as more inventive ones, such as *probaat* for *probat* or *buonum* for *bonum* (Virg. *Epit.* X.63–79).

Scrambling of letters constitutes a separate type of *scinderatio* of which Virgilius says: *Tertium genus, quo litteras scindimus. Scinderatio autem litterarum superflua est, sed tamen a glifosis sensuque subtilibus recipitur* ‘The third kind is when we scramble letters. The scrambling of letters is unnecessary, but nonetheless is permitted by cunning people of hair-splitting ingenuity’ (Virg. *Epit.* X.29–31; trans. Law 1995: 85). The four examples that accompany this description are indeed intended for experienced ‘scramblers’. One of the simpler ones, ascribed to Cicero reads: *RRR SS PP MM N T EE OO A VI* which ‘obviously’ stands for *Spes Romanorum perit* (Virg. *Epit.* X.33–4). This type of *scinderatio* introduces certain ambiguity to the meaning of *fonum*. Virgilius prefaces his examples with a remark that short *fona* are easier to scramble than long ones (Virg. *Epit.* X.32). However, the examples themselves do not differ too significantly in the length of words of which they consist but rather in the length of the sentences used. Moreover, the manner in which Virgilius rearranges the letters is important. Instead of scrambling the letters within the limits of an individual word (e.g. *epss* for *spes*) he pools all letters of all the words in the sentence into a sort of ‘alphabet soup’ and then groups the same letters together. This seems to suggest that the *fonum* that is being thus scrambled is not an individual word but the entire phrase. While this is the only instance among Virgilius’ uses of *fonum* where such ambiguity arises, it does bring to mind the vernacular *focal* which in poetic contexts appears to similarly oscillate between a word and a phrase.

The similarities between *fonum* and *focal* do not end here. Since the main aims of *scinderatio fonorum* are to adorn speech and to conceal the meanings of words and texts from those who are not sufficiently trained,<sup>159</sup> it is functionally and perhaps

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<sup>159</sup> According to Virgilius himself, the purpose of the technique is threefold: *O fili, inquit, ob tres causas fona finduntur. Prima est, ut sagacitatem discentium nostrorum in inquirendis atque inueniendis his quae obscura sunt adprobemus; secunda est propter decorem aedificationemque eloquentiae; tertia ne mistica quaeque et quae solis gnaris pandit debent, passim ab infimis ac stultis facile reperiantur* ‘My son, words are scrambled for three reasons: first, so that we may test the ingenuity of our students

even genetically related to the techniques of obscuration practiced by Irish poets. Returning to the type of composition known as *treḟocal*, Liam Breatnach (2017: 2) pointed out that there was a special emphasis on the metrical perfection of such a poem. One of the texts that regulates stylistic features of *treḟocal* is the early Middle Irish ‘*Treḟocal Tract*’.<sup>160</sup> The text focuses on the stylistic and metrical faults that may blemish a *treḟocal* and proposes techniques that help elevate poetic diction. The theme of virtues and vices of poetic composition in Irish poetico-legal tradition, including the genre of *treḟocal*, was explored by Deborah Hayden, who pointed out that the goals of intellectual exaltation and exclusion of the uninitiated associated with these obscurantist techniques may indeed be indebted to Virgilius’ teachings (Hayden 2011: 12 n. 35). Moreover, a few specific comparisons to Virgilian *scinderatio* can be made, namely the techniques of *dichned*, *dechned*, and *cennachros* mentioned in the copy of the ‘*Treḟocal Tract*’ preserved in the Book of Leinster and *formolad* featuring in the Book of Uí Maine version (ed. Breatnach 2017: 43–4, 48). The ‘*Treḟocal Tract*’ itself does not elaborate on the details of these techniques; instead it only names them and provides sample stanzas for their use. However, they are discussed at length, with the same examples, in the Middle Irish scholia on *Amra Choluimb Chille*.<sup>161</sup> It is worth citing a few excerpts from it:

*ar is ed bís hi fortched, temligud 7 duaichnigud na **focul** tria digbail 7 tria thormach 7 tria inchumscugud do dénam intib, 7 atat .iii. gné fair .i. dichned 7 dechned 7 cennachros.*

*Iss e in dichned .i. a chenn do gait dond **focul**, 7 cen ni aili inna hined [...].*

*Is he in dechned, dá c[h]enn fair .i. a chenn fein 7 cenn aili. Ocus co mbad hé a diles, ind litter dedenach ind **focoil** do emnad, amal dognethe ‘benn’ dondni as ‘ben’ [...].*

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in searching out and identifying obscure points; secondly, for the ornamentation and reinforcement of speech; thirdly, lest mystical matters which should only be revealed to the initiated be discovered easily by base and stupid people’ (Virg. *Epit.* X.4–10; trans. Law 1995: 83). For a discussion of the purposes of *scinderatio* with a focus on the first, educational, reason, see Doležalová (2009). This reference has been kindly suggested to me by my examiners.

<sup>160</sup> The text is preserved in two principal copies in the Book of Leinster (TCD MS H 2.18 (1339)) and the Book of Uí Maine (RIA MS D ii 1). Excerpts from it are also found in TCD MS H 3.18 (1337) and the Book of Ballymote (RIA MS 23 P 12 (536)). The so-called ‘Prose *Treḟocal*’ is contained in TCD MS H 3.17 (1336). Besides, the poem *Treḟocal tractait filid* ‘[It is] *treḟocal* [that] poets plead’, with a prose introduction, is incorporated into the *Auraicept* (1928–2180). Parts of the ‘*Treḟocal Tract*’ are included and expanded in the Middle Irish glosses on the *Amra Choluimb Chille* in the manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 502. Breatnach (2017: 37) dated the original text to ‘a time at the very end of the Old Irish period or the very early Middle Irish period’.

<sup>161</sup> The main text of *Amra Choluimb Chille* has been recently edited by Jacopo Bisagni (2019). An overview of its abundant scholia is offered by Paul Russell, who noted the links to the *Auraicept* specifically in relation to the terminology of word change and obscuration (Russell 2014: 69).

*Is he in cennachros, ut est 'senchas', ar is 'fenchas' ro bae de prius.*

[For *fortched* consists in this, the obscuration and disguising of words by making in them diminution and augmentation and mutation. And there are three kinds of it, namely *dichned* and *dechned* and *cennachros*.

This is *dichned*, to take away its end from the word without (putting) anything else in its place [...].

This is the *dechned*, i.e. two ends thereon, its own end and another end: and what is proper to it is to double the final letter of the word, as *benn* would be made out of *ben* 'woman' [...].

This is the *cennachros*, as is *senchas*, for formerly it was *fenchas*].<sup>162</sup>

Thus it is suggested that *fortched* ('covering', 'disguise') is the collective name for the three techniques of word-modification: *dichned* 'beheading' whereby a letter is cut off from the beginning or the end of a word, *dechned* which doubles the final letter of a word and *cennachros* which alternates the initial letter in a word. The commentator also adds that *dechned* is often confused with another obscuration technique, namely *formolad filed* 'augmentation of the poets' which requires *tormach sillaibe* 'the increase of a syllable', as when, for example, *terc* 'few' turns into *tercda*. Importantly, throughout this passage *focal* is used to refer to the entity which is being modified. In the context of this example, *focal* acquires an additional shade of meaning that is reminiscent of Virgilius' *fonum*. It is presented as a flexible word-form that can be manipulated in various ways in order to enhance the stylistic features of a composition and to elevate its diction to a level where it becomes a code for those who share the knowledge of these specialist techniques.

While the varieties of *fortched* cannot be exactly mapped onto the types of *scinderatio* described by Virgilius, certain parallels can still be observed. So, for instance, a procedure somewhat similar to *dichned* is when verbal endings are used for entire verbs, such as *o* for *opto* or *ur* for *nominator* (Virg. *Epit.* X.53–7). This technique is more radical than *dichned*, which only omits single letters, but it follows similar logic.<sup>163</sup> Likewise, *dechned* and *formolad* are mirrored, though vaguely, in such 'scramblings' as *probaat* for *probat* and *navigabere* for *navigare* (Virg. *Epit.*

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<sup>162</sup> The passage is edited and translated in Stokes (1899: 150–3). Here it is cited after Breatnach (2017: 27–30) as he introduced several alterations to Stokes' reading.

<sup>163</sup> Interestingly, Michael Herren (1979: 66) suggested that Virgilius might have been familiar with the term *dichned* ('beheading') based on his use of the phrase *caput testimonii* 'head of the word'. Herren (1979: 65–6) also offered a further comparison between Virgilius' cryptographic teachings and Irish techniques of *filidecht*.

X.73–5). Where *dechned* and *formolad* should take place at the beginning or end of a word, Virgilius adds letters and syllables into the middle of words (of course, technically both examples here are of added syllables but this shows how the confusion between *dechned* and *formolad* in vernacular tradition could have arisen, with single vowels sometimes comprising complete syllables). Finally, *cennachros* where an initial or final letter is substituted has a counterpart in Virgilius' example *ago* for *ego* (Virg. *Epit.* X.78), though the difference here is that *cennachros* usually applies to consonants. It is not unlikely that these parallels, although not exact, may grow out of one and the same tradition.

One final aspect of Virgilius' term *fonum* needs to be addressed. When it is used in the catalogue of the twelve Latins, it acquires the sense of a lexical word as the focus here is on the meaning of the *fona* characteristic of each variety, for instance:

*II Asena, hoc est notaria, quae una tantum littera pro toto fono contenta est, et haec quibusdam formulis picta* (Virg. *Epit.* XII.32–4).

[II *Asena*, i.e. shorthand, which represents a whole *fonum* with a single letter in a prescribed form (trans. Law 1995: 113)].

*IX Presina, hoc est spatiosa, cum unum fonum multa usitata significat, ut 'sur', hoc est uel 'campus' uel 'spado' uel 'gladius' uel 'amnis'.*

*X Militana, hoc est multimoda, cum pro uno fono usitato multa ponuntur, ut pro 'cursu' 'gammon', 'saulin', 'selon', 'rabath'* (Virg. *Epit.* XII.66–71).

[IX *Presina*, i.e. comprehensive, when one *fonum* signifies many common [words], like *sur*, which means 'field' or 'gelding' or 'sword' or 'stream'.

X *Militana*, i.e. manifold, when many [words] are used in the place of one common *fonum*, as for example for 'running', *gammon*, *saulin*, *selon*, *rabath* (trans. Law 1995: 113, lightly modified)].

Here *fonum* appears to be more than simply word-form – it is a form that conveys certain meaning (or multiple meanings), that is, a lexical word. Note, too, how the second variety, *Asena*, which purports to represent lexical meaning in a single letter, ties back to the discussion of letters as bearers of abstract signification. The phrase *quibusdam formulis picta*, literally 'depicted in certain outlines', furthermore suggests that the meaning that a letter thus represents may be modified by altering the exact way in which the letter is executed graphically.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has covered much ground, starting from different aspects of understanding the 'word' gleaned from the indirect evidence of Irish scribal

practices to details of vernacular and Hiberno-Latin terminology for denoting it. It has been shown in the first section that, while scribal conventions often drew on phonological structures and the perceived unity of prepositional phrases, theoretical approaches to ‘wordhood’ favoured grammatical criteria. An important factor in this practice was the introduction of word separation for the purposes of copying Latin texts. The importance of the lexical word, a combination of form and meaning, is evidenced in the flourishing of the glossary as a genre.

Further nuances have been revealed in the close investigation of different words for ‘word’ available to Irish scholars writing in two languages. The three vernacular terms considered – *epert*, *bríathar* and *focal* – all share emphasis on the lexical aspect of the word. Each of them also possesses additional shades of meaning. So, *epert* is presented as a primarily lexical unit, a base-form as it is specified in *Dliged sésa* that it is not the object of morphological transformation. It shares these qualities with its Latin counterpart, *dictio*. Interestingly, however, this usage is not found in the works of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus who pre-dates other sources considered in this chapter and uses *dictio* as a complex constituent within a sentence, a clause. The second vernacular term, *bríathar*, apart from the same emphasis on its meaning, has a broader spectrum of applications than *epert*. In the context of *Dliged sésa*, it appears to refer to ‘word’ as a product of morphological change which, as such, can be used to build syntactic structures of various scale. Similar to Latin *verbum*, with which it shares the technical meaning ‘verb’, it can also refer to speech in general and, beyond that, to any type of meaningful signs, not limited to linguistic expression. In a somewhat similar manner, vernacular *focal* can ambiguously refer to single words (in grammar and poetry) or to phrases or statements (in legal texts and in certain poetic contexts, most notably in *tréfocal*). Generally, it is the preferred term in texts that deal with poetic and legal matters. The exploration of Virgilius’ Hiberno-Latin terminology largely focused on a term of his own invention – *fonum*. It revealed itself to be rather versatile. Its primary goal is to emphasise the physical properties of a word (in contrast to the incorporeal *verbum*) and its pliability as an object of cryptographic techniques. In this it is remarkably similar to *focal* as it is used in texts that codify the stylistic and metrical rules of *tréfocal*. At the same time, *fonum* has a pronounced lexical aspect and is thus not entirely disconnected from the realm of the incorporeal.

Overall, the argument presented in this chapter has shown that word was understood as a complex entity which can be approached from multiple perspectives. A recurrent theme that has emerged from the foregoing is the view of the word as a union of form and meaning. While it might appear self-evident at first, there are many further questions that arise from this conclusion: how should the relationship between the two be understood? is there a connection between what a word looks and sound like and what it means? what different types of meaning can be encoded in a word? These question will come to the forefront in the next chapter.

## **Part II**

### **Words, Things and Thoughts: Irish Theories of Meaning**



## Chapter 4: Meaning through Form

### *Definitions and Etymology*

This chapter will address analytical strategies that Irish intellectuals employed for exploring the semantic content of words through careful study of their formal properties. It will focus on the connection between meaning and form and on the corporeal aspects of signification. This perspective will be complemented by an exploration of the incorporeal views on meaning in Irish tradition in Chapter 5.

The analytical strategies in question are etymology and formal definition of a kind suggested by the categories of dialectic. Ever since Irish scholars acquired access to Isidore's *Etymologiae* in the second half of the seventh century, etymology had become a pillar of Irish intellectual tradition.<sup>164</sup> The theory of definitions rose to prominence with the emerging interest of grammarians in the methods of dialectic in the second half of the eighth century and, although it was mostly limited to grammatical works that drew on Priscian, it became an important step in developing a strict method for categorising different types of signification that a word possesses, building on the simple dichotomy of sound and substance. Indeed, it may be noted that the importance of providing words with logically correct definitions as a guarantee for the proper functioning of the semantic process was emphasised in more recent times by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923: 109–38), whose work 'The Meaning of Meaning' greatly contributed to the modern discipline of semantics. They observed: 'it is through the definitions employed that the parts of the symbolic system are linked together' (Ogden and Richards 1923: 121). It is therefore all the more interesting that early medieval scholars likewise saw value in definitions as a tool for semantic analysis and should be investigated as an important component of Irish philosophy of language.

This chapter will start by considering the Hiberno-Latin theory of definitions and proceed to a discussion of Irish etymological practice. Despite being younger and less ubiquitous than etymology, the theory of definitions offers a good starting point for addressing the questions of the relationship between meaning and form because,

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<sup>164</sup> A long-standing scholarly consensus had been that Irish scholars started to read and use *Etymologiae* soon after the work's completion in 636 AD (cf. Bischoff 1961: 327–30; Herren 1980; Hillgarth 1984: 8–10). However, assessing more recent research, Marina Smyth (2016) suggested late-seventh century as a more reliable date of Isidore's reception in Ireland.

through its systematic approach to the types of signification, it helps to contextualise etymology within a wider range of early medieval theories of meaning.<sup>165</sup>

### ***Classification of Definitions: Evolution and Significance***

To start talking about the ways in which Irish scholars used definition as a tool for semantic analysis we need to return to some of the points made in Chapter 1 regarding Priscian's definition of *uox* and the remarks on the affinity between vernacular terms *son* and *folad* ('substance') in the St Gall glosses. It is worth citing Priscian again:

*Philosophi definiunt, vocem esse aerem tenuissimum ictum vel suum sensibile aurium, id est quod proprie auribus accidit. Et est prior definitio a substantia sumpta, altera vero a notione, quam Graeci ἔννοιαν dicunt, hoc est ab accidentibus. Accidit enim voci auditus, quantum in ipsa est (GL II 5.1–4).*

[Philosophers define *vox* as the finest struck air or its [property] perceptible to the ears, that is, what properly happens to the ears. The first definition is derived from substance and the other from notion, which the Greeks call ἔννοια, that is, from the accidents. Hearing pertains to *vox*, inasmuch as it is in itself].

Looking at this passage from a new perspective, one notices that Priscian separates his initial definition into two parts: definition derived *a substantia* 'from substance' and definition *a notione* 'from notion' or *ab accidentibus* 'from the accidents'. Anneli Luhtala (2005: 86–97) pointed out that Priscian, most likely relying on Greek tradition, consistently used the Aristotelian categories of substance and accidents in his definitions of parts of speech. The same is done here: struck air is understood as the substance of *vox* and the ability to be heard as its accident, i.e. non-essential property.

Irish glossators took note of this added subtlety but their method of classifying definitions differed from Priscian's. The full definition of *vox* cited above is marked in St Gall as *diffinitio substantiae* 'definition of substance' (Sg. 3a1a). At the end of the chapter *de voce*, Priscian offers alternative etymologies for the Latin term *vox*. The glossator designates this passage as a different type of definition, distinct from *diffinitio substantiae*:

*Vox autem dicta est vel a vocando [...] vel ἀπὸ τοῦ βοῶ, ut quibusdam placet (GL II 6.4–5).*

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<sup>165</sup> A portion of this chapter (section 'Classification of Definitions: Evolution and Significance') has been previously published in Bauer and Krivoschekova (2022).

[*Vox* is so called either from ‘naming’ (*a vocando*) [...] or from ἀπὸ τοῦ βῶ, as some prefer.

[gl. *uox*] .i. *diffinitio soni* (Sg. 3a33ss).

[i.e. definition of the sound].

The *substantia/sonus* distinction is not limited to the chapter on *vox*. It finds further use in the discussion of the noun in *De nomine*. Priscian once again opens the chapter with a definition: *Nomen est pars orationis, quae unicuique [...] corporum seu rerum [...] qualitatem distribuit* ‘Noun is a part of speech which assigns quality to each body and thing’. He then suggests that the Latin term *nomen* is related to Greek ὄνομα ‘noun’ or Latin *notamen* ‘note’ (*GL* II 56.29–57.4). The glossator once again classifies the two statements as definition of substance and definition of sound, this time in the vernacular:

[gl. *nomen*]: .i. *herchóiliuth folaith* (Sg. 27b9=27b33y).

[i.e. definition of substance].

[gl. *dicitur*] .i. *herchóiliuth suin* (Sg 27b13=27b38gg).

[i.e. definition of sound].

I have shown elsewhere that glosses of this type are found in a number of other glossed manuscripts of Priscian’s *Ars grammaticae* and that they are likely to have originated from Irish tradition (Bauer and Krivoshekova 2022). It is worth briefly recapitulating this argument here and, while doing so, to consider how different varieties of definitions were thought to encode different types of signification in a word.

The interest in definitions was part and parcel of a larger intellectual movement which aimed to bring methods of dialectic into the study of grammar. Alcuin of York (ca. 731–804) is often considered as ‘the first medieval grammarian to bring both the method of definition and the conceptual content of dialectic to bear on the traditional definitions of speech, writing, and the *partes orationis* in the *artes grammaticae*’ (Irvine 1994: 323).<sup>166</sup> However, other grammarians before or contemporary with him were also making steps towards a theory of definitions rooted in logic by observing and commenting on the use of definitions in Donatus

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<sup>166</sup> On the influence of the Aristotelian tradition on Alcuin’s approach to definitions, see Irvine (1994: 321–2).

and Priscian. This effort appears to be predominantly concentrated in works of Hiberno-Latin background.

A search on the ‘Library of Latin Texts’ database helps estimate just how much Hiberno-Latin material dominates the theory of definitions: for the period between ca. 600 – ca. 900, approximately 85% of all results come from grammatical texts of Irish background or with Hiberno-Latin connections: the Donatus-commentaries by Murethach, Sedulius Scottus and the *anonymus of Lorsch*, the grammatical florilegium by Donatus Ortigraphus, the anonymous *Ars Ambrosiana* and *Ars Bernensis*.<sup>167</sup> One other text is firmly connected to an Irish milieu: the eighth-century *Liber de verbo* has been shown to depend heavily upon Hiberno-Latin grammar (cf. Taeger 1991; Löfstedt 1965; Conduché 2018: 88–124). The few non-Irish authors that make use of the theory of definitions are either influenced by Hiberno-Latin grammarians (e.g. Remigius of Auxerre, Hrabanus Maurus, Erchanbertus) or follow the model expounded in Porphyry’s *Isagoge* (Isidore, Peter of Pisa) and thus cannot be considered originators of the *substantia – sonus* schema.<sup>168</sup>

The two types of definition gleaned from the St Gall glosses are not the full extent of the early medieval classification of grammatical definitions. The theory appears to have developed gradually from this twofold scheme and, in its final form, counted as many as six different types of definitions. This evolution will be explored in the remainder of this section.

#### *Twofold scheme: Ars Ambrosiana and Ars Bernensis*

Our earliest surviving witnesses of the changing use of definitions in grammatical discourse are two anonymous Donatus-commentaries: *Ars Ambrosiana* and *Ars Bernensis*. *Ars Ambrosiana*, although it was written by a non-Irish speaker in Bobbio, presumably in the late-seventh/early-eighth century, contains traces of a lost Hiberno-Latin source which can be dated to the second half of the seventh century

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<sup>167</sup> For the details of search conditions and a table of results, see Bauer and Krivoshchekova (2022: 96–7). The prominence of definitions in Hiberno-Latin texts has also been observed and catalogued by Cristina Sánchez Martínez (2002). She primarily focused on definitions in the three ninth-century Irish Donatus-commentaries: those by Sedulius Scottus, Murethach and the *anonymus of Lorsch*.

<sup>168</sup> *Isagoge* served as a general introduction to Aristotle’s logical oeuvre and was translated into Latin by Boethius. Porphyry proposed that there are five elements necessary for a definition: genus, species, difference, property and accident (Evangelidou 1997: 176; Law 2003: 150–2). For the non-Irish uses of the theory of definitions, see Bauer and Krivoshchekova (2022: 97), Sánchez Martínez (2002: 129–30).

(O'Rorke 2020).<sup>169</sup> According to Mark Amsler (1989: 208), *Ars Ambrosiana* was one of the texts to inaugurate 'a more technical and dialectical commentary discourse concerned with the status of grammatical metalanguage'. The work also records the earliest use of the 'binary' definition of substance and sound in the context of Donatus' definition of the noun: *nomen est pars orationis cum casu corpus aut rem proprie communiterue significans* 'noun is a part of speech with case which signifies a body or a thing properly or commonly' (*GL IV 373.2–3*). It receives the following treatment:

*Haec dictio difinitio nominatur, cuius genera sunt XV; de quibus in hac difinitione II continentur: uocis et substantiae. Et ab eo quod est 'nomen' usque dicit 'cum casu' soni est difinitio, sequens uero substantiae est* (Ambros. 8.65–8).

[This expression is called 'definition' of which there are fifteen types; two of them are contained in this definition: [definition of] sound (*uocis*) and substance. From 'the noun...' up to 'with case' it is the definition of sound (*soni*) while the rest is [the definition] of substance].

The definition of substance here is rather straightforward: it is the type of signification that the noun performs by denoting 'a body or a thing either properly or commonly'. This is the conceptual content associated with the word *nomen*, free from any associations with its formal properties.

The definition of sound (*definitio soni/vocis*) is apparently contained within the phrase *nomen est pars orationis cum casu* 'the noun is a part of speech with case'. At first glance, this explanation is hardly comparable to the *definitio soni* of the St Gall glosses and which requires an etymological derivation or at least a connection to related or similar-sounding words. But Donatus' chapter on the noun entirely lacks any such explanations. What, then, are we to make of our grammarian's statement? The use of *sonus* and *vox*, two terms that may refer to the phonological properties of a word, in conjunction with the fact that this type of definition also can potentially encode morphological features of a word (case-endings) reflected in the phonological form, suggests that *definitio soni/vocis* is preoccupied with word-as-form, a combination of phonological and morphological properties of the noun, the root and nominal case endings understood as discrete sonic shapes.

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<sup>169</sup> See also the older argument for Irish origins of the text in Löfstedt (1965: 21; 1980: 301; 1982a: vii) and Holtz (1981a: 271; 1983: 175–6). It was based on the parallels with other Hiberno-Latin grammars as well as on the presence of an Old Irish gloss in *Ars Ambrosiana*. Argument for a continental author is found in Law (1982: 93–7) and Visser (2011: 8).

Another noteworthy detail is the mention of the fifteen types of definition. It recurs through some of our texts and refers to *Liber de definitionibus* by Marius Victorinus, a fourth-century Roman rhetorician, theologian and philosopher (Vict. *De def.* 32.18–33.5).<sup>170</sup> His elaborate scheme made a significant, though mostly superficial, impression on medieval grammarians. While the author of *Ars Ambrosiana* may have been familiar with Victorinus' oeuvre first-hand, his theory of definitions was mostly known through the paraphrase by Cassiodorus in his *Institutiones* (Cassiod. *Inst.* II.iii.14; ed. Mynors 1961: 119–24) and later by Isidore of Seville in the *Etymologiae* (*Etym.* II.xxix). *Ars Ambrosiana*, however, presents an early case of medieval deviation from Victorinus' method: the definition of sound is not found in his list and appears to be an innovation.

Despite the absence of direct analogy, Cécile Conduché (2018: 28) suggested that *definitio soni* as a category used by early medieval grammarians may go back to Victorinus' *definitio ad verbum*. While this is possible, it is necessary to add that such a borrowing would have required significant intellectual transformation. Victorinus' *definitio ad verbum*, which we can roughly render as 'definition by glossing', is simply said to denote *haec uocem illam de cuius re quaeritur alio sermone designat* 'the vox of the thing in question through another word' (Vict. *De def.* 36.23–37.1). The accompanying example is the pair *conticescere* and *tacere*, both meaning 'to fall/be silent' (Vict. *De def.* 37.3). The focus here is rather on the synonymy (and, perhaps, common derivation), whereas *definitio soni* infers semantic connections specifically from overt sonic similarities or, in the case of *Ars Ambrosiana*, takes morphological structure into account.

Alternatively, and in light of the discussion presented in Chapter 1, it is possible to suggest that the roots of *definitio soni* may lie in Irish grammatical tradition and specifically in the technical meaning of the term *son* in vernacular grammatical discourse which appears to have been transferred onto Latin *sonus* (cf. pp. 38–45). The author of *Ars Ambrosiana*, drawing on a Hiberno-Latin source, may have thus inherited the Hiberno-Latin usage of the term. That this was possible at such an early stage is confirmed by the fact that the study of Priscian and the growth of the glossing-tradition started in Ireland as early as the seventh century (cf. Strachan 1903: 470–1; Hofman 1988: 806).

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<sup>170</sup> See mentions of the fifteen types of definitions in Mur. 47.30–1; Sed. *In mai.* 58.4–5.

The next traceable step in the development of the medieval methodology of definitions is *Ars Bernensis* – the surviving section of what presumably was an exhaustive commentary on Donatus' *Ars maior*. Louis Holtz (1981a: 434–6; 1995: 124–6) placed its composition in late-eighth-century Bobbio and proposed Irish authorship, based on the fact that the text uses the Irish recension of Donatus.

The author introduces his twofold definition in the discussion of the noun:

*Nomen quomodo definitur secundum sonum, hoc est secundum superficiem, et quomodo **secundum sensum**, hoc est **secundum substantiam qualitatis**? Ista differentia est. Vbicumque enim inuenitur 'dictus' uel 'dicta' uel 'dictum', definitio soni esse ostenditur [...]. Sic etiam nomen definitur: 'nomen dictum est, quasi notamen, eo quod nobis uocabulo suo res notas efficiat'. Vbicumque autem inuenitur in definitione 'est', **definitio sensus, idest qualitatis** esse demonstrator [...]. Sic etiam **secundum qualitatem substantiae** nomen definitur: 'nomen est pars orationis cum casu corpus aut rem proprie communiterue significans' (Bern. 63.35–64.12).*

[How is the noun defined according to the sound, that is, according to the surface, and how [is it defined] according to the sense, that is, according to the substance of the quality? This is the difference: wherever the words '[he is] called', '[she is] called' or '[it is] called' are found, the definition of sound is shown [...]. And so the noun is defined: 'the noun is called as in *notamen* because it reveals to us familiar things through its name'. But wherever [the word] 'is' is found in the definition, the definition of sense, that is, of quality, is demonstrated [...]. And so the noun is defined according to the quality of the substance: 'the noun is a part of speech with case which signifies a body or a thing either properly or commonly].

Despite some indecisiveness in the use of terminology (viz. interchangeable use of *definitio sensus*, *definitio qualitatis*, *definitio secundum substantiam qualitatis*, *definitio secundum qualitatem substantiae*), the dichotomy of substance and sound is employed in the same way as in the St Gall glosses. The author's use of linguistics formulae – *dictus/a/um est* and *est* – to distinguish between sound and substance is remarkable. It will be addressed, with further parallels, in the next section (pp. 138–40).

On the whole, the evidence of *Ars Ambrosiana* and *Ars Bernensis* reflects the simple dichotomy observed in the glosses: the superficial features of a word as a grammatical unit are separated from its conceptual content which is revealed through the substantial definition.

### *Threefold Scheme: Murethach*

From here, the evolution of definitions picks up pace with the help of three major Hiberno-Latin commentaries on Donatus' *Ars maior*, all going back to the same hypothetical lost source (Holtz 1973). They are works by Murethach, Sedulius Scottus and the anonymus of Lorsch. Despite their closeness, Murethach's commentary is somewhat removed from Sedulius and *Ars Laureshamensis*: the parallels that it shares with them are often not literal and his use of Priscian is less extensive. According to Holtz, the lost text on which all three commentaries rely must have been written after ca. 710 – the date of composition of Bede's *De arte metrica* which Murethach uses, presumably following his source (Holtz 1973: 63 n. 1). A conservative estimate for the date of this hypothetical text would be late-eighth/early-ninth century (cf. Holtz 1981a: 488).<sup>171</sup> Murethach's own commentary was written in the 840s in Auxerre where he taught. The work became quite a success: it was used in the schools of Auxerre and Metz in Murethach's lifetime and had become influential in Fleury, Lyon, Reims and Paris by the end of the ninth century (Holtz 1977b: lxxiv–lxxvi; 1991b).

With this in mind, let us turn to Murethach's view of definitions:

*Interea sciendum est quindecim esse genera apud rhetores definitionum, e quibus grammatici tres sibi tantummodo uindicant, scilicet definitionem soni et definitionem substantiae et definitionem numeri. Definitio substantiae duo ostendit, communionem uidelicet et proprietatem; definitio uero soni quattuor modis constat, deriuatione compositione cognatione interpretatione. Non omnis tamen definitio soni has quattuor obtinere potest, sed unaquaeque definitio soni aliquam habet ex his. Definitio uero numeri tria demonstrat: ueritatem rei pandit, inscios instruit, superfluos aestimatores repellit. (Mur. 47.30–40).*

[Meanwhile, it should be known that there are fifteen types of definitions with the rhetoricians from which grammarians claim only three for themselves, to wit, definition of sound, definition of substance and definition of number. Definition of substance shows two [things]: the common and the proper quality; definition of sound consists of four modes: by derivation, by composition, by affinity, by translation. Not every definition of sound, however, can possess these four but each definition of sound has some of

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<sup>171</sup> In a later article, Holtz (1991a: 149–50) offered the dating 820–840 for the lost text, based on the fact that both Murethach's and Sedulius' commentaries include borrowings from *Liber in partibus Donati* written ca. 805 by Smaragdus of St-Mihiel. He also suggested that the lost source must have been written on the continent shortly before the arrival of Murethach and Sedulius. Holtz's argument is built on the parallel definitions of comparison in the three texts. However, while Sedulius' version is similar to Smaragdus, Murethach's definition is hardly comparable to the other two (cf. citations in Holtz 1991a: 155). The connection between Smaragdus and the lost Hiberno-Latin text is therefore not conclusive.



these. Definition of number, however, demonstrates three [things]: it spreads the truth about a thing, it instructs the ignorant, it drives away the unwanted appraisers].

This passage introduces a few changes to the picture established in the earlier texts while also maintaining a certain continuity, particularly with *Ars Ambrosiana*. The mention of the fifteen types of definitions as well as the definition of substance which conveys common or proper quality are both features that persisted in the tradition since the seventh century. The definition of number is a major addition to the scheme. It is worth mentioning, however, that this is not the first attestation of the concept in Irish sources. *Definitio numeri* makes a brief appearance in *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum* (*Ad Cuimn.* 30.72–3) where it is implied that stating the quantity of a thing is a kind of definition in itself. The introduction of the four sub-types of the *definitio soni* is a rather intriguing innovation. Murethach provides further details and examples for each subtype, and the same information is also found in Sedulius (cf. *Mur.* 48.77–49.83; *Sed. In mai.* 58.10–20). Once again, a closer examination of this topic has to be relegated to the following section as the present discussion solely focuses on sketching out the evolution of the theory of definitions.

It is worth mentioning that another threefold classification of definitions can be found in the eighth-century treatise *De verbo* which has been shown to depend heavily on Hiberno-Latin sources, particularly on *Ars Malsachani*, *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum* and *Ars Ambrosiana* (Taeger 1991; Löfstedt 1965; Conduché 2018: 88–124). The scheme proposed by the author of *De verbo* preserves the substantial definition and the definition of sound but includes *difinitio qualitatis* ‘definition of quality’ (ed. Conduché 2018: 172.30–2) as its third element. This category is easier to account for as, unlike *definitio numeri*, it is a part of Marius Victorinus’ catalogue of definitions. However, the author of the treatise does not make further use of *difinitio qualitatis* beyond its mention alongside the other two types.

*Six-fold Scheme: Clemens, Donatus Ortigraphus, Sedulius, Ars Laureshamensis*

A further elaboration on the classification of definitions appears consistently across an entire quartet of early- to mid-ninth-century texts which can be divided into two closely related pairs: Donatus Ortigraphus – Clemens Scottus and Sedulius Scottus – *Ars Laureshamensis*.

Yet another treatise travelling under the name *Ars grammatica*, an early-ninth century text on the eight parts of speech, has been, with some reservations,

attributed to Clemens Scottus (fl. 814–826), an Irish teacher at the court of Louis the Pious.<sup>172</sup> The text itself is firmly situated within an Irish milieu as it draws on a number of Hiberno-Latin grammars.<sup>173</sup> Clemens' *Ars* also has close ties to the work of the same name by Donatus Ortigraphus, an extensive florilegium with excerpts and quotations culled from an impressive variety of grammatical sources, though perhaps not directly (Chittenden 1982: xxxiv). It is a unique text because it deviates from the structure of a lemmatised commentary on Donatus and instead offers a broad, if somewhat unfocused, overview of contemporary grammatical theory. It can be dated to ca. 815, after the time of Alcuin and contemporaneous with the activity of Clemens Scottus at the Carolingian court (Chittenden 1982: xxiii–xxiv). The work was written in France, though a more precise localisation is difficult.

The remaining pair of texts – Sedulius Scottus' commentary on *Ars maior* and the anonymous *Ars Laureshamensis* – share a common prototype which goes back to a lost Hiberno-Latin commentary on Donatus also used by Murethach. Sedulius and *Ars Laureshamensis*, however, update their contents to include more extensive passages from Priscian, compared to only passing mentions by Murethach. Bengt Löfstedt (1977: xiii–xiv) suggested that the source of innovation might be *Ars Laureshamensis* itself while Sedulius used it as one of his sources. Sedulius does, however, add a personal touch to his commentary, often supplementing new material and overall showing a greater concern for dialectic (cf. Holtz 1973: 59; Gibson 1975: 4–5; Luhtala 1993: 151–2 *et passim*).

The two pairs of texts – DO–Clem. and Sed.–*Laur.* – unequivocally agree on the issue of definitions. The scheme that they present is the most elaborate one yet and comprises six types. Donatus Ortigraphus describes it in most detail:

*Quot sunt genera diffinitionis nominis? Alii dicunt sex, id est **diffinitio quae sit per accidentia** ut dicitur: 'nomini accidunt sex'; **diffinitio numeralis** ut dicitur: 'partes orationis sunt octo'; **diffinitio specialis** ut dicitur: 'proprie communiterue'; **diffinitio secundum ethimologiam** ut dicitur: 'homo ab humo, humus ab humiditate'; **diffinitio soni** quando de sono tantum intellegimus, ut est: 'nomen dicitur quasi notamen' quod nobis uocabulo suo res*

<sup>172</sup> Attribution to Clemens is based on a colophon in one of the copies of the text. However, a number of scholars have called it into question (cf. Manitius 1911: 456–8; Barwick 1930: 394–5). Argument for Clemens' authorship can be found in Joannes Tolkiehn's *editio princeps* (1928). In more recent scholarship, John Chittenden (1982: xxvi n. 18) suggested that attribution to Clemens should not be discounted until there is definitive proof one way or the other.

<sup>173</sup> Including the eighth-century anonymous *Ars Ambianensis*, *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum*, *Ars Bernensis* and the Irish grammarians Malsachanus and Cruindmelus. See Law (1981: 84–90; 1982: 67–74), Taeger 1991: 15–19 *et passim*).

*notas efficit; diffinitio substantiae per quam ostenditur substantia atque natura omnis creaturae. Vt dicit Donatus de nomine: Nomen quid est? Pars orationis cum casu corpus aut rem proprie communiterue significans (DO 66.29–39).*

[How many types of the definition of the noun are there? Some say six, that is, definition according to accidents, as in: ‘the noun has six accidents’; the numerical definition, as in: ‘there are eight parts of speech’; definition of species, as in: ‘properly or commonly’; definition according to etymology, as in: ‘*homo* from *humus*, *humus* from *humiditas*’; definition of sound when we understand only from the sound, as in: ‘*nomen* is called as in *notamen*’ because it reveals to us familiar things through its name; definition of substance through which the substance and nature of every created thing is shown. As Donatus says about the noun: ‘What is a noun? A part of speech with case which signifies a body or a thing either properly or commonly].

We find a similar version of the same list, albeit in different order, in Clemens and *Ars Laureshamensis* (Clem. 112.7–14; *Laur.* 10.14–21). The scheme with its six components – accidents, number, species, etymology, sound and substance – appears to be a new development. The fact that it is present already in Clemens suggests that it might have emerged by the early-ninth century at the latest. This advanced classification may be only slightly younger than the threefold scheme used by Murethach. Interestingly, Sedulius used both the threefold (with the four subtypes of *definitio soni*) and the six-fold scheme, although he does not indicate which one he considers preferable.<sup>174</sup>

A theory concerning the emergence of the six-fold scheme has been proposed by Cristina Sánchez Martínez (2002). She argued that the extended model was a result of subdividing the three definitions listed by Murethach into more minute logical categories: the definition of substance received an extension in the definition of species, the definition of number in the definition of accidents, the definition of sound in etymology (Sánchez Martínez 2002: 125). This explanation coincides both with our chronological reconstruction and with the assumption that dialectic played an increasingly significant role in grammatical discourse over the course of the eighth and ninth centuries. It seems, however, that despite (or due to) the theoretical sophistication of the six-fold model it did not find much practical use.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> The threefold scheme is very similar to Murethach (cf. Sed. *In mai.* 58.4–20). The six-fold scheme is almost the same as in *Ars Laureshamensis* (cf. Sed. *In mai.* 64.16–23).

<sup>175</sup> For this reason, Vivien Law (1997: 158–9) suggested that the threefold scheme might be a truncated version of the bulkier six-fold one.

The four authors who describe it do not use all six types, but instead opt for substance, sound and sometimes number and etymology (cf. *Laur.* 7.2–24).

Overall, this examination of the theory of definitions has shown that the entire process of its development from the simple *substantia* – *sonus* pair into a complex six-fold scheme can be traced through texts associated with Irish grammatical learning. As regards its sources, it is an eclectic collection of elements borrowed from different pre-existing classifications and original contributions by Irish scholars themselves. The following section offers a more detailed look at individual categories.

### ***What Types of Meaning Does a Word Encode?***

#### *Sound and Substance*

Having thus inspected the evolution of definitions in Irish tradition, we may now turn to consider the purpose that different types served in determining a word's meaning. As has been pointed out previously, the simple dichotomy of substance and sound helps distinguish between the core conceptual signification of a word independent of its form and the additional aspects of meaning revealed through the search for phonologically similar words. The author of *Ars Laureshamensis* provides an example of this scheme's practical application when he breaks down the term *pars orationis* 'part of speech':

*Quaerendum est autem, quomodo definiatur pars **secundum substantiam**. Ita etiam definitur: Pars est uox indicans mentis affectum (hoc est cogitationem) [...].*

*Quaerendum est etiam, quomodo partes **secundum sonum** definiantur. Ita nempe: Partes dicuntur a parilitate, hoc est ab aequalitate. [...] Item aliter: Pars dicta est a partiendo, non quod partes in semet ipsis diuisae consistere et plenum sensum queant habere, sed quod ex his partibus perfecta oratio coniuncta siue diuersa constet.*

*Oratio quoque **secundum substantiam** ita definitur: Oratio **est** ordinatio dictionum congruam sententiam perfectamque demonstrans. **Secundum sonum** autem ita: Oratio **dicta est** quasi oris ratio, eo quod ex ore et ratione consistit (*Laur.* 7.2–24).*

[It should be asked, however, how *pars* should be defined according to substance. It is defined thus: *pars* is a word (*vox*) which points to mental experience (that is, to thought) [...].

It should also be asked, how *partes* should be defined according to sound. Indeed, thus: *partes* are called from 'uniformity' (*a parilitate*), that is from equality. [...] And alternatively: *pars* is called from 'dividing' (*a partiendo*),

not because *partes*, being divided, could exist in themselves but because perfect speech, connected or separated, consists of these *partes*.

*Oratio* is likewise defined as follows, according to substance: *oratio* is an arrangement of words which demonstrates a harmonious and complete idea. According to sound, however, [it is defined] as follows: *oratio* is so called as if it were 'reason of the mouth' (*oris ratio*), because it depends upon the mouth and upon reason].

The passage clearly shows that, of the two definitions, the definition of substance explains the concept underlying the word while the definition of sound focuses on the word as a morpho-phonological unit and seeks to make sense of its physical form. It can trace a word back to a single other word (e.g. *pars dicta est a partiendo*) or analyse it into smaller elements (e.g. *oratio quasi oris ratio*).

It is also instructive to consider the linguistic formulae used for either of the two types of definition. We have already come across such observations made by the author of *Ars Bernensis* (p. 133). The same considerations are employed by other Hiberno-Latin authors, including Donatus Ortigraphus (DO 66.40–6) and Murethach (Mur. 49.87–90). Sedulius Scottus adds his own metalinguistic flair to the passage:

*Quaeritur enim, quomodo possit cognosci differentia in supradictis definitionibus [...]. Ad quod dicendum: quotiens 'sum' uerbum substantiuum ponitur, definitio substantiae, quotiens uero ponitur 'dictus dicta dictum' participium praeteriti temporis uel 'dicitur' uerbum impersonale, definitio est soni (Sed. In mai. 59.64–70).*

[It is asked, however, how the difference in the aforementioned definitions can be recognised [...]. To this it is said: whenever the substantive verb 'I am' (*sum*) is used, it is the definition of substance; but whenever the past participle 'he/she/it is said' (*dictus, dicta, dictum*) or the impersonal verb 'is called' (*dicitur*) is used, it is the definition of sound].

These formulae fully apply to the example from *Ars Laureshamensis* cited earlier. The definition of substance builds on a predicative structure with the verb *esse* 'to be': *oratio est ordinatio dictionum* etc. It equates the word with its underlying concept and ultimately, if applicable, with its referent in the natural world. The definition of sound employs a different strategy, namely the formula *dictus/a/um est* 'is called'. It implies a different relationship between the headword and its definition: *oratio dicta est quasi oris ratio* etc. Rather than equivalence of word and concept, it is a proximity between two (or more) otherwise independent words which hints at a semantic connection.

Besides, the *est*-formula presupposes a natural relation between the word being defined and its definition: *oratio* is an ‘ordering of words’ naturally, that is, without any human involvement. The *dictus*-formula, on the other hand, necessarily reflects a relationship imposed by humans because something is *said* to be so by language users. The source of knowledge inferred from the definition of sound is therefore language itself rather than extraverbal reality. This is aptly observed, with a spurious reference to Augustine, by Donatus Ortigraphus:

*Vt Augustinus dicit: Vbi inuenimus ‘dictus’ uel ‘dicta’ uel ‘dictum’ non natura ibidem diffinitur sed quod usu uel auctoritate uel consuetudine sit. Vbi uero inuenies uerbum quod dicitur ‘est’, ibi natura **sensus uel uocis** uel **sensus et uocis** diffinitur (DO 66.43–46).*

[As Augustine says: where we find ‘he is said’ or ‘she is said’ or ‘it is said’, in that place one does not define nature but because it is [so] by usage, authority or convention. Where you find the verb ‘is’, however, there the nature of meaning or *vox*, or of meaning and *vox* is defined].

It would seem then that the definition of sound delineates patterns of morphological or phonological derivation observed by speakers. The substantial definition, on the other hand, reveals the objective meaning signified by the word. Note, too, how Sedulius makes reference to the motif discussed in Chapter 1, whereby sound and sense may coincide or disagree (pp. 42–4). Grammarians use variable terminology for this phenomenon – *son* and *ciáll*, *sonus* and *intellectus*, *litteratura* and *sensus*. Here, Donatus Ortigraphus opts for *vox* and *sensus*, with *vox* taking on the meaning of a phonological word. The two may or may not be united in expressing a certain nature.

It has been suggested earlier that the pairing of substance and sound appears to have been the earliest incarnation of the classification of definitions in Irish sources, and for good reason. These two types of definition establish a basic model for thinking about linguistic meaning as having two possible origins: one conceptual, whereby the core semantic content of a word can be identified independently of its form, and one rooted in the corporeal properties of a word, where formal similarities, when aptly analysed, can elicit additional semantic scripts that enhance the base ‘substantial’ meaning. The remaining types of definitions roughly adhere to this distinction, with the definition of number, accident and species adding to the definition of substance and the definition of etymology further exploiting the semantic resources of word-as-form, akin to the definition of sound.

## Number

The next addition to this scheme is the definition of number. As was mentioned, *definitio numeri* is not found among the fifteen types of definitions outlined by Marius Victorinus but it does occur in one of the earliest Hiberno-Latin grammars, *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum*.<sup>176</sup> The definition of number found rather frequent use in the commentaries of Murethach, Sedulius and the *anonymus* of Lorsch. In these texts, remarks that mention the number of accidents, properties, of vowels and consonants in the Latin alphabet, of the grades of comparison, of the parts of speech etc. are punctuated with the pronouncement *definitio numeri est hic* or variations thereof.

I would like to suggest that *definitio numeri* as used in Hiberno-Latin texts originated in the tradition of enumerative literature which flourished in Ireland in the early medieval period. While enumeration as a method of composition was well known among patristic and medieval authors, Irish scholars' fondness for it is exceptional. Charles Wright (1993: 50–1) observed in relation to Irish exegetical and homiletic literature: 'In comparison with most continental authors, they were nearly obsessive in their zeal for collecting every odd enumeration they could find in the Fathers, to which they added further either by reformulating as numerical themes non-enumerative lists and sequences from biblical and patristic texts, or by inventing new ones'. This enumerative style could serve to structure entire texts, such as *Liber de numeris*, *De XII abusiis saeculi*, 'The Triads of Ireland', or was used as a recurring motif in texts of other genres, for instance, in the *Apigitir Chrábaid*, *Collectaneae Pseudo-Bedae*, *Catechesis Celtica* or Sedulius Scottus' *Collectaneum*.<sup>177</sup> In employing this technique, authors purport to list a predetermined number of things: three kinds of martyrdom, seven heavens, twelve abuses of the world and

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<sup>176</sup> Interestingly, Victorinus does talk about *enumeratio*, enumerating the component parts of a concept, as one of the three *definitiones substantiales* (Vict. *De def.* 32.9–14; cf. 23.4–32.8). The other two are definition *a toto* and *a nota*. *Definitio a nota* is essentially based on etymological analysis while *definitio a toto* is the one that is further subdivided into fifteen types. It is tempting to suggest that the Hiberno-Latin *definitio numeralis* and *definitio etymologiae* stem directly from Victorinus. However, the evidence for transmission is lacking. I have not been able to identify early medieval manuscript copies of *De definitionibus* with Irish connections. Two authors who made extensive excerpts from Victorinus' work and were well known to Irish scholars – Isidore (*Etym.* II.xxix) and Cassiodorus (Cassiod. *Inst.* II.iii.14; ed. Mynors 1961: 119–24; trans. Halporn 2004: 197–202) – focus only on the fifteen types of definitions and do not include the preamble where the three 'substantial definitions' are discussed.

<sup>177</sup> For an examination of the Irish 'enumerative style' in these and other texts, see Meyer (1906: vi–xv), McNally (1957: 24–5), Reynolds (1979), Wright (1989; 1993: 49–75). On the triad of thought, word and deed as a frequent exegetical motif in Irish texts, see Sims-Williams (1978).

many more. Patrick Sims-Williams (1978: 78) suggested that Irish exegetes were so unusually preoccupied with enumeration ‘perhaps because the mnemonic techniques of the secular learned class were borrowed for the presentation of religious material’. This can be compared with the concept of ‘distinction’ which has been discussed in Chapter 3 and which similarly serves for organising and listing constituents within a class.

Moreover, the love for enumeration is evident in the description of *definitio numeri* itself, with its threefold purpose: *Definitio uero numeri tria demonstrat: ueritatem rei pandit, inscios instruit, superfluos aestimatores repellit* ‘Definition of number, however, demonstrates three [things]: it spreads the truth about a thing, it instructs the ignorant, it drives away the unwanted appraisers’ (Mur. 47.38–40).<sup>178</sup> While this triad itself is rather generic and does not seem to describe the definition of number specifically, it nevertheless provides an immediate illustration of *definitio numeri* in action by mentioning a number and offering an itemised list to correspond with it.

### *Accident*

The six-fold classification is augmented with three new types of definitions: *specialis*, *accidentalis* and *secundum etymologiam*. They will be addressed separately in this order. The first two, definition of species and definition of accidents, can be identified with two of the five predicables that describe an entity in Aristotelian logic, as summarised in Porphyry’s *Isagoge*: genus, species, difference, property and accident (cf. n. 168 above). In the vocabulary of dialectic, accident refers to a non-essential, contingent property of a substance, that is, a property without which the substance does not lose its identity. We have also seen that Priscian introduced the definition *ab accidentibus* ‘from the accidents’ as a part of his definition of *vox* and noted that it is an alternative name for the definition *a notione* ‘from (the) notion’. He also suggested that the Latin term parallels the Greek *ἐννοια* which likewise means ‘thought, notion, conception’. We find a more detailed account of the definition *quae dicitur ἐννοηματική* in Victorinus’ *De definitionibus* where it is described as *cum rei notio non substantiali ratione percepta, sed actu res cognita proferatur* ‘when the notion of a thing is not perceived through the understanding of substance but [when] the thing being comprehended is revealed through action’

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<sup>178</sup> Similar descriptions are found in Sedulius (Sed. *In mai.* 58.22–5, 68.38–41, 243.10–11) and *Ars Laureshamensis* (Laur. 113.40–2).



(Vict. *De def.* 34.11–12). The idea here is that the definition *ab accidentibus* describes actions which a thing is capable of performing. Priscian himself uses it in this way when he suggests that the accident of *vox* is its ability to be heard.

However, thinking about accident as a grammatical concept in Irish tradition seems to pre-date the widespread use of Priscian and is rather tied to Donatus. The four texts that distinguish *definitio accidentalis* draw on Donatus' statement that the noun has six *accidentia*: quality, comparison, gender, number, figure, case (*GL IV* 373.4). The Irish authors then unanimously point out that usually 'accident' is understood as a non-permanent property, i.e. it can be present or absent in different degrees (this is the Aristotelian point of view). However, contrary to this standard view, they add that *accidentia* of the parts of speech are not external but internal and unchangeable:

*Sciendum uero est, quod uniuscuiusque partis accidentia non extrinsecus accidunt [...], sed plenitudo et perfectio uniuscuiusque partis per sua accidentia intelligitur, cum nequaquam haec accidentia recedere possint. Quapropter post definitionem substantiae transit Donatus ad accidentia, quia substantia partium maxime ex his accidentibus constat. Sicut enim corpus sine membris non ualet subsistere, ita partes sine accidentibus plenum sensum non queunt habere (Sed. In mai. 68.60–69.70.).*

[It should be known that the accidents of every part [of speech] do not pertain [to them] externally [...], but the completeness and perfection of every part [of speech] are understood through its accidents, because these accidents can in no way disappear. Therefore, after the definition of substance, Donatus proceeds to the accidents, because the substance of the parts [of speech] mostly consists of these accidents. Just as the body is unable to subsist without the limbs, so parts [of speech] cannot have complete sense without the accidents].<sup>179</sup>

This approach to grammatical *accidentia* goes back to older texts that do not yet single them out as a separate type of definition: considerations about the unchangeable nature of *accidentia* can be found already in *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum* (*Ad Cuimn.* 26.122–8) and *Ars Bernensis* (*Bern.* 64.27–33). Thus accident as a category of grammatical definition appears to refer to those properties of a word which are subject to inflectional morphology.

### *Species*

*Definitio specialis* is another type of definition which is influenced by the study of dialectic while also drawing on Donatus. The four texts that introduce it give the

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<sup>179</sup> Compare to similar passages in Mur. 55.60–8; Laur. 12.56–62; Clem. 114.15–19; DO 70.132–9.

following example: *corpus aut rem proprie communiterue significans* (Clem. 112.10–11; DO 66.32; *Laur.* 10.17–18; Sed. *In mai.* 64.19–20). One may recognise this phrase as a part of Donatus' definition of the noun according to which it signifies 'a body or a thing properly or commonly'. What seems to be implied here is that proper and common nouns are the two species of the noun as a genus. Thus, the function of *definitio specialis* is to pinpoint the subcategories of the concept in question.

It should be noted that, unlike the other four types, both *definitio accidentalis* and *definitio specialis* do not find use outside of the general exposition of the six-fold scheme. However, on two occasions, Sedulius turns to the Aristotelian notion of definition, for which his likely source is Isidore.<sup>180</sup> He analyses Donatus' definitions of *littera* and *vox* in terms of the four predicables of a substance, with a reference to Porphyry's *Isagoge*:

*Breiter ergo non sine dialectica uocem definiens: 'uox est', inquit, 'aer ictus sensibilis auditu quantum in ipso est'. In qua definitione quattuor formae (id est introductions, ysagoge) elucent. Nam ibi species praemittitur dicendo 'uox'. Genus demonstratur cum subinfertur 'est aer'. Differentia quoque ad aerem qui non est ictus ostenditur, cum subditur 'ictus' [...]. Ideoque ut uocis proprietates ostenderetur, statim subinfertur 'sensibilis auditu quantum in ipso est' (Sed. *In mai.* 3.29–43).*

[Thus, his brief definition of *vox* is not without [the influence of] dialectic: 'vox', he says, 'is struck air perceptible to hearing, inasmuch as it is in it'. In this definition, four forms (that is, introductions, *isagogae*) are apparent. For here species is indicated by saying 'vox'. Genus is demonstrated when 'is air' is subjoined. Besides, the difference to the air which is not struck is shown when 'struck' is supplied [...]. Therefore, in order to show the [unique] property of *vox*, 'perceptible to hearing, inasmuch as it is in it' is immediately subjoined].<sup>181</sup>

This approach to definition is rather different from the one cultivated within Hiberno-Latin tradition. Out of the four elements presented here – genus, species,

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<sup>180</sup> See, for example, Isidore's summary of Porphyry: *Nunc Isagogas Porphyrii expeditamus. Isagoga quippe Graece, Latine introductio dicitur, eorum scilicet qui Philosophiam incipient: continens in se demonstrationem primarum rationum de qualibet re quid sit, suaque certa ac substantiali definitione declaretur. Nam posito primo genere, deinde species et alia, quae vicina esse possunt, subiungimus ac discretis communionibus separamus, tamdiu interponentes differentias, quousque ad proprium eius de quo quaerimus signata eius expressione perveniamus* 'Now let us set forth Porphyry's *Isagoge*. 'Isagoge' (*Isagoga*) is a Greek word, in Latin 'introduction' (*introductio*), specifically for those who are beginning philosophy. It contains in itself a demonstration of the first principles of any thing as to what it may be, and the thing is explained with its own solid and substantial definition. First we posit the genus, then we subjoin the species and other things that can be allied, and we separate them by particulars they hold in common, continually introducing the *differentiae* until we arrive at the individual character (*proprium*) of the thing whose identifying properties we have been investigating by means of a definition that marks it out' (*Etym.* II.xxv.1–2; trans. Barney et al. 2006: 80–1).

<sup>181</sup> Sedulius applies a similar schema to the definition of *littera* (Sed. *In mai.* 5.2–6.20). On the possible acquaintance of Irish scholars with Porphyry and Boethius, see Poppe (1999b: 199).

*differentia* and property – only species occurs in the six-fold scheme. Moreover, it is understood differently here. Whereas the example for *definitio specialis* given by the four Irish grammarians consists in naming the subcategories of the concept being defined, in the Aristotelian (or Porphyrian) view, the concept itself is the species of a larger genus (viz. *vox* is a species of air).

These inconsistencies and the paucity of applications of *definitio specialis* and *definitio accidentalis* seem to suggest that they were not as well grounded in the logic of the classification and in the practicalities of its use within Hiberno-Latin grammatical tradition. They may have been given the status of separate categories of definition due to the perceived centrality of the terms ‘species’ and ‘accident’ within the emergent dialectically oriented grammatical metalanguage but they failed to take root in practice.

### *Etymology*

Finally, the etymological definition remains to be addressed. Earlier we have observed regarding the definition of sound that it helps establish meaning by means of analysing the physical properties of the word, specifically its sound. Similarity of pronunciation can be interpreted as representing a tangential semantic connection. However, this raises the question: is this not simply a description of the medieval etymological method? It may seem that the conclusions regarding *definitio soni* can be equally applied to etymology: both use formal similarities between words as an explicative device to draw out semantic parallels. However, the fact that the definition of sound and the etymological definition are listed as separate categories in the six-fold classification seems to suggest that the two are not identical. It helps to revisit this part of Donatus Ortigraphus’ exposition:

*diffinitio secundum ethimologiam ut dicitur: ‘homo ab humo, humus ab humiditate’; diffinitio soni quando de sono tantum intellegimus, ut est: ‘nomen dicitur quasi notamen’ quod nobis uocabulo suo res notas efficit (DO 66.32–36).*

[definition according to etymology, as in: ‘*homo* from *humus*, *humus* from *humiditas*’; definition of sound when we understand only from the sound, as in: ‘*nomen* is called as in *notamen*’ because it reveals to us familiar things through its name].

Evidently, the definition of etymology and the definition of sound are not the same thing, at least on a theoretical level. The example provided for *definitio soni* is borrowed from Priscian: *nomen quasi notamen (GL II 57.3)*. The phrasing itself does

not suggest that one word derives from the other; rather, they are simply linked through their phonological similarity by means of the conjunction *quasi* 'as if'.<sup>182</sup> Then follows a semantic justification for linking the two words introduced by the conjunction *quod* 'because'. Indeed, now it becomes clear that *nomen* and *notamen* do not simply share similar pronunciation but that from this phonological similarity arises a pragmatic association: it is explained that nouns allow the speaker to engage with things to which they refer (*res notae*).

It seems, then, that the definition of sound helps to establish free phonological associations between words independently of whether such associations are understood to be morphologically justified or not. This interpretation is reinforced by the author's remark that with the definition of sound we understand *de sono tantum* 'only from the sound', without taking into account any other presupposed criteria. Once the sonic correspondence is discovered, the scholar may use their wit and erudition to find a creative semantic link between the two words. Here, real or perceived morphological relation is not important but the formal similarity may reveal something of either of the words' meaning.

We can now turn our attention to the etymological definition. The example that accompanies it is the derivation *homo* 'man' < *humus* 'soil' < *humiditas* 'humidity'. At first glance, this is not radically different from *definitio soni*. There is a sense of phonological or perhaps morphological derivation in this chain of words expressed through the preposition *a(b)* 'from'. But the epistemological value here is rather different. Etymological definition, more so than the definition of sound, relies on extralinguistic explanation: semantic inferences are made not only based on the linguistic form but also from the relations that obtain between the referents in the physical world. Indeed, deriving *homo* from *humus* invokes the biblical account of the creation of man (Gen. 2:7). The connection is spelled out by Isidore, the etymologist *par excellence*: *Homo dictus, quia ex humo factus est, sicut [et] in Genesi dicitur: 'Et creavit Deus hominem de humo terrae'* 'Human beings are so named because they were made from the soil, just as is [also] said in Genesis: "And God created man of the soil of the earth".' (*Etym.* XI.i.4; trans. Barney et al. 2006: 231).<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> On the use of *quasi* in early Irish glossaries, see Russell (2005a) who suggested that it was commonly used to introduce a modification to the lemma so that it better aligns with the proposed etymology.

<sup>183</sup> Roswitha Klinck (1970: 72–6) discussed the trope of the creation of man from soil/clay and traced its evolution from classical myth to Christian exegesis.

The first half of the etymological chain thus encodes biblical knowledge. The second half is grounded in natural history and can again be traced back to Isidore. He suggested that *humus* 'soil' is so called because it is the lower, humid layer of earth (*humida terra*), such as the ocean floor, as opposed to *terra* which is called so because it is the upper layer that 'is worn away' (*teritur*) (*Etym.* XIV.i.1). The complete derivation combines biblical knowledge with encyclopaedic knowledge of the natural world. Thus etymology, like the definition of sound, starts with a perceived linguistic similarity but goes beyond it in that it roots this similarity in factual knowledge of extralinguistic reality.

In its ability to triangulate between language, reality and interpretation, etymology can acquire exegetical significance. It is therefore not surprising to find a part of the same etymological example transferred into an exegetical text. The author of the 'Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter' co-opts etymology for moral interpretation of the opening words of Psalm 1 – *beatus vir*. When asked why the word *vir* 'man' cannot be substituted for the synonymous *homo*, the author replies: *Nach airm atá homo isin scriptúir, is do thórund aprisce dóinde scríbhthair, ar is ab humo rohainmniged* 'Wherever *homo* occurs in the Scriptures, it is written to mark human frailty, for it was named *ab humo* (OIT 454–7). Here, the hermeneutical implications of the etymology are drawn out more explicitly: the semantic connection between *homo* and *humus* does not only point to the Creation narrative but also brings to the forefront the connotations of weakness and corruption bound up with the earthly descent of the human body. While the author stops here, this line of thought naturally leads the reader to another commonplace etymology – *vir a virtute* (cf. *Etym.* X.274) – because a man without virtue cannot be blessed, and virtue is indeed a spiritual, not a corporeal phenomenon.

Now it is possible to draw some conclusions regarding the difference between *definitio soni* and *definitio etymologiae*. There is no denying that they are very close: the examples illustrating both are borrowed from Isidore, for whom the distinction did not exist. However, in the hands of Hiberno-Latin grammarians, whose predisposition towards enumeration and classification was enhanced with the newly discovered interest in dialectic, the definition of sound crystallised from the multifaceted Irish etymological practise into a separate epistemological procedure. Unlike etymology which presupposes a natural relation between the thing and the word, the definition of sound explicitly acknowledges the conventional nature of

language (the *dictus*-formula). Nevertheless, it still makes semantic inferences based on formal proximity between words. The etymological definition employs the same basic strategy of transforming phonological similarity into a semantic one, but in addition it also construes an exegetical ascent from the glosseme towards hidden meanings which encode the very nature of creation through formal derivation. We shall return to the exegetical function of etymology shortly.

One further point that needs to be addressed in relation to the relationship between *definitio soni* and *definitio etymologiae* is the four subcategories of *definitio soni*. This additional classification is associated with the threefold scheme found in Murethach and Sedulius who list the four subtypes with examples:

*Definitio soni quattuor modis constat: deriuatione, compositione, cognatione et interpretatione. Sed non omnis definitio soni has quattuor species habet, sed unaquaeque aliquam habet ex istis. Deriuatione fit definitio soni, sicut a uerbo quod est 'duco' uenit 'dux' nomen; compositione fit, ut uerbi gratia 'participium' dicitur quasi 'partes capiens', municeps dicitur quasi 'munia capiens'; cognatione fit, sicut 'terra' dicitur a terendo, 'homo' dicitur ab humo, 'humus' ab humore; interpretatione fit, sicut 'ars' dicitur ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀρετῆς, id est a uirtute; χριστός dicitur grece latine dicitur 'unctus' (Sed. In mai. 58.10–20).<sup>184</sup>*

[Definition of sound consists of four types: by derivation, by composition, by affinity and by translation. However, not every definition of sound can possess these four types but each one has some of these. The definition of sound occurs by derivation, as the noun *dux* 'leader' comes from the verb *duco* 'I lead'; by composition, as, for example, *participium* 'participle' is so called as if *partes capiens* 'taking parts', *municeps* 'citizen' [as if] *munia capiens* 'taking duties'; by affinity, as *terra* 'earth' is so called from *terendum* 'wearing away', *homo* 'man' is called from *humus* 'soil', *humus* from *humor* 'fluid'; by translation, as *ars* 'art' is called from ἀπὸ τῆς ἀρετῆς, that is from the virtue; Christ is called so in Greek, in Latin [he is called] 'anointed [one]'].

The four types and their examples are rather transparent and, while, to my knowledge, this schema does not occur in other early medieval sources, the categories correspond well to the general etymological strategies described by Mark Amsler (1989: 23; cf. Klinck 1970: 45–70). Thus, to follow Amsler, *derivatio* authorises the meaning of a word by deriving it from a primary form, *compositio* splits up a compound word and draws the meaning from the separate referents, *interpretatio* translates the meaning of a loanword into the target language or finds formal similarities between words of different languages. The final category identified by Amsler – *expositio* – associates one word with another 'on the basis of

<sup>184</sup> Cf. Mur. 47.34–8, 48.77–83.

either sound similarity or a connection between meanings' (Amsler 1989: 23). It corresponds to what Murethach and Sedulius call *cognatio* 'affinity' and it is also the category which causes some confusion. Indeed, the example used here, *homo – humus – humor*, is almost identical to the example of *definitio etymologiae* in the six-fold scheme. This is additional evidence to our previous conclusion that the threefold classification preceded the six-fold one. It appears that there was an attempt to systematise the sprawling methods of etymological analysis but it was done using the notion of sound (*sonus*) which emerged in the eighth century as an umbrella term for designating word-as-form. When the theory of definitions received further expansion, etymology earned its own entry on the list but still had to share some of its functionality with *definitio soni*.

### **Cindas tíagar ina n-inni de? *Etymology at Large***

Much has already been said about etymology within the context of the theory of definitions. However, prolific etymologising was an important aspect of Irish intellectual tradition on a much wider scale. Various aspects of Irish etymological practice have been previously explored by Rolf Baumgarten (1983; 1990; 2004), who often focused on the etymology of place-names and personal names, and Paul Russell (1988; 2005a; 2008), who explored the structure and functioning of early Irish dictionaries. Russell (2012: 19–21) has also identified two main etymological techniques employed in the glossaries: the first analyses the lemma into two or more smaller meaningful components and the second derives the lemma from a word in a different language, usually one of the *tres linguae sacrae*. These are identical to the techniques named by Murethach and Sedulius as *compositio* and *interpretatio* within the sub-categorisation of *definitio soni*.

### **Bélrae n-etarscartha and *Exegetical Ascent***

As was suggested earlier, these essentially etymological methods only later were re-analysed within the scope of the theory of definitions. It should be noted, moreover, that this only occurs in Hiberno-Latin sources but not in vernacular ones where the practices of deriving meaning from formal analysis were not strictly systematised and rather existed as an ubiquitous, diffuse substrate present in all genres of learned discourse. So, for example, the practice that was known to ninth-century grammarians as *compositio* found ample application already in *De origine scoticae*

*linguae* the first version of which was compiled shortly after Isidore's *Etymologiae* gained an audience in Ireland in the mid-seventh century (Moran 2019: 76–7):

*Aslinge .i. absque lingua .i. cen bérla nó tengaid.*

[*Aislinge* 'vision, dream', i.e. without language, i.e. without speech or tongue (*DOSL* 66)].

Here the Irish glosseme is analysed as a compound of two elements which are, moreover, drawn from a different language, thus making this etymology a hybrid of *compositio* and *interpretatio*. The author of the entry transparently connects *-linge*, the second element of *aislinge*, with Latin *lingua* which he then renders as *bérla/bérlae* 'speech' or *tengae* 'tongue' thus preserving the ambiguity of the Latin word. The first element *ais-* requires more significant manipulation to turn it into the Latin preposition *absque* 'without'. Nevertheless, the author managed to preserve the consonantal pattern [A + S] in the transition to Latin.<sup>185</sup> The end result successfully captures the core meaning of the word *aislinge* 'vision' (Latin *visio*), namely something that is seen, by providing an etymology that highlights the lack of other communicative sensory input, namely language.<sup>186</sup> This is indeed an entirely valid way to arrive at the meaning of *aislinge* and it requires a considerable amount of creative linguistic manipulation to achieve.<sup>187</sup>

The practice of splitting up words receives the most systematic vernacular treatment in *Auraicept na nÉces* where we find a list of the five species of the Irish language, one of them being *bérlae n-etarscartha* 'the language of separation':

*Ocus berla n-edarsgarta eter na fedaibh aireghdaibh .i. berla tresna fuil deliugud na fid n-aire[gh]da isin aenfocul triana n-inde taithmeach.*

[And 'separated language' among the principal vowels, that is, language through which there is distinction of the principal vowel in the individual word through analysing their meaning (*Auraic.* 1317–19; translation lightly modified)].

Within the framework of *bérlae n-etarscartha*, a word (*oenfocal*) is broken up into constituent elements which preserve the original consonantal structure but allow

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<sup>185</sup> On the importance of consonantal structure in *compositio*-type etymologies, see Russell (2008: 3–7). He also commented on the 'relaxed attitude towards vowel quality' in etymologies (Russell 2005a: 58).

<sup>186</sup> This is perhaps an example of etymology *ex contrariis* 'from the contrary' which is one of the three types of etymologies listed by Isidore along with derivation *ex causa* 'from their rationale' and *ex origine* 'from the origin' (*Etym.* l.xxix.3). Pádraic Moran (2019: 46) noted that etymology *ex contrariis* is the only type absent from *DOSL*, but *aislinge* might be a rare specimen of it.

<sup>187</sup> For a similar example from *DOSL*, see the etymology of *bríathar* in Chapter 3 (p. 109).



for the modification of the vowels (cf. Russell 2008; 5–6). The example provided in the *Auraicept* is likely borrowed from *Sanas Cormaic* where we find the following entry:

*Ross .i. trēde fordingair .i. ros fidbuide, ros lín 7 ros uisce. Sain didiu accuis as rohainmniged cach āe. Ross fidbaide cētamus .i. reoi-oss. Ros lín dano .i. ro-āss. Ros uisce dano .i. rofos ōn, ar nī bī acht for marbuisce* (Corm. Y 1079; cf. *Auraic*. 1319–23).

[*Ros* i.e. three things it means i.e. *ros* ‘wood’, *ros* ‘flaxseed’, and *ros* of the water (‘duckmeat’). A different cause for each. *Ros* ‘wood’, first, *reoi-oss* (‘a land of deer’); *ros* ‘flaxseed’, then *ro-ās* ‘great growth’; *ros* of the water, then *rofos* (‘great rest’) for it never is save on stagnant water (trans. O’Donovan and Stokes 1868: 141; translation lightly modified)].

The passage demonstrates the application of *bélrae n-etarscartha* for disambiguating the meanings of a group of homonyms. Thus, we get three different ‘causes’ (*accuis*, a calque from Latin *occasio*) for the triple meaning of the word *ros*: ‘wood’, ‘duckweed’ and ‘flax’. The phrasing itself configures the etymological process as a logical enquiry into the *ratio* of language. We can arrange the proposed explanations as follows to highlight its systematic nature:

(1) *ros* ‘wood’ < *reoi-oss* ‘land of deer’ < *róe* ‘plain’ + *os* ‘deer’ (because a wood is where deer live);

(2) *ros* ‘flax’ < *ro-āss* ‘great growth’ < *ro-* ‘great’ + *ās* ‘growing’ (because flax grows fast);

(3) *ros* (*ros uisce*) ‘duckweed’ < *rofos* ‘great rest’ < *ro-* ‘great’ + *fos* ‘rest’ (because duckweed grows on marshes).

The methodology of *bélrae n-etarscartha* is quite transparent: it is to split up the word into syllables or, in case of monosyllabic words, into smaller clusters of letters and expand the resulting parts into new words and phrases which preserve the outlines of the phonetic structure of the original lemma and reflect various aspects of a word’s meaning.

Liam Breatnach has discussed a number of illuminating examples of this technique found in the glosses to early Irish legal tracts. It is worth borrowing one of them here because it presents a quintessence of the heuristic potential of *bélrae n-etarscartha*. It is a gloss on the word *eclais* ‘church’ added to the text of the seventh-century legal collection *Senchas Már*:

*ECLAIS* .i. *Ecan-chlas, clas in ecna; nō eclas, īclas, clas īcca cāich in eclas iminnī recait a leas. nō eclas ūag-clas, clas ūaightir ar cāch in eclas; nō eclais, ēcen-leas, baili i ndēntar les neich in ūair bīs i n-ēcin; nō eclais ōnī is ecclesia* (CIH II 503.7–10; modified according to Breatnach 2016: 123).

[*ECLAIS* i.e. *ecan-chlas* the assembly of wisdom; or *eclas*, ‘healing assembly’, the church is an assembly which heals everyone who needs to be; or *eclas*, ‘whole assembly’, the church is an assembly which is joined together for all; or *eclais* ‘need-enclosure’, a place where a person is provided for when he is in need; or *eclais* from the word *ecclesia* (trans. Breatnach 2016: 123)].

Indeed, as Breatnach (2016: 123) noted, after the initial series of creative etymologies the final option, which derives *eclais* from Latin *ecclesia*, seems somewhat anti-climactic, despite being the only solution acceptable by modern standards. The four alternative etymologies developed through *bélrae n-etarscartha* exploit phonetic resources of Irish to most fruitful semantic conclusions. Translation is the etymologist’s last resort. It helps to summarise the four ‘separated’ etymologies on offer:

(1) *eclais* < *ecan-chlas* ‘assembly of wisdom’ < *ecnae* ‘wisdom’ + *clas* ‘assembly’;

(2) *eclais* < *īclas* ‘healing assembly’ < *ícc* ‘healing’ + *clas* ‘assembly’;

(3) *eclais* < *ūag-clas* ‘whole assembly’ < *óg* ‘whole’ + *clas* ‘assembly’;

(4) *eclais* < *ēcen-leas* ‘need-enclosure’ < *éicen* ‘necessity’ + *les* ‘enclosure’.

Three of the four etymologies build on the word *clas* ‘assembly’ which not only happens to phonologically resemble the second syllable of *eclais* but also, perhaps not incidentally, reflects the meaning of the original Greek word *ἐκκλησία* ‘assembly’.<sup>188</sup> It is then paired with the nouns *ecnae* ‘wisdom’ and *ícc* ‘healing’ and the adjective *óg* ‘whole’. Similarly to previous examples, the glossator takes liberties with vowels but maintains the consonantal pattern [C + L + S]. On the semantic level, these etymologies acknowledge the role of the church as the place of education (‘assembly of wisdom’) and spiritual nurture (‘healing assembly’) for believers and reinforce its universal character (‘whole assembly’). The final etymology uses different building blocks: *éicen* ‘necessity’ and *les* ‘enclosure’. This derivation may consciously reflect the layout and legal status of ecclesiastical settlements in early

<sup>188</sup> See, for example, the etymology of *eclais* in *DOSL: Eclais grece ab ecclesia .i. conuocatio .i. conuocare ad homines, congregare ad greges pertinent* ‘Eclais “church”, Greek from *ecclesia* [ἐκκλησία], i.e. a calling together, i.e. [Lat.] *conuocare* ‘to call together’ pertains to men, *congregare* ‘to flock together’ to flocks (*DOSL* 360; cf. Moran 2019: 397–8).

medieval Ireland. These were modelled partly on the secular *les* – an area around a house enclosed by a wall – and partly on the sacred topographies of the Old Testament, including the imagery of Jerusalem with its wall and the notion of *ciuitas refugii* ‘city of refuge’, or ecclesiastical sanctuary (cf. Charles-Edwards 2000: 108, 120; Ó Carragáin 2010: 59, 78–79). All these levels of meaning can be unlocked through etymological analysis and are not reflected in the matter-of-fact derivation from Latin *ecclesia*.

A common motif in our examples is the multiplication of etymologies for a single word or a single phonological shape, as in the case with the homonym *ros*. This aspect of Irish etymologising was noted by Russell (2008: 7):

[N]o single etymological analysis is seen as exclusively correct but the variety of approaches is intended to allow one to get closer to the *vis nominis* ‘the force of the word’ – each analysis carrying its own germ of truth and highlighting a particular feature of the sense of the word.

Irish scholiasts imbibed this idea of etymological plurality from Isidore himself since, as Davide Del Bello (2007: 106) pointed out, Isidorean etymology likewise pursues the goal of collecting ‘the word’s various actual or potential semantic scripts’ and arranging them into a ‘dynamic network of meaning’. Thus, the multiplication of etymologies did not devalue the exercise but, on the contrary, helped elucidate and disentangle the semantic complexity of language by manipulating letters and syllables. We have already touched upon this feature of Irish intellectual tradition in previous chapters. It is what Luigi Munzi (2013–14: 70) described as *il peculiare interesse analitico per la composizione e scomposizione delle parole* ‘a distinct analytic interest in composition and decomposition of words’.

Writing about similar practices in high medieval tradition, Roswitha Klinck (1970: 62–3, 161–84) pinpointed the reason for using multiple interpretations: etymology may serve as a starting point for allegorical interpretation.<sup>189</sup> While it is not the aim of this chapter to discuss the concept of meaning as it pertains to the theory of

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<sup>189</sup> She pointed out: *Die Etymologie ist auch hier wieder das Bindeglied zwischen dem Literalsinn und der allegorischen Auslegung. Durch ihre Vermittlung stehen die beiden Deutungsebenen für den Leser nicht mehr unverbunden nebeneinander, sie gehen bruchlos auseinander hervor, da es für den Kommentator ein Leichtes ist, mit Hilfe der Etymologie zu zeigen, wie der Spirituelsinn im Literalsinn buchstäblich impliziert ist* ‘Here too, etymology is once again the link between literal sense and allegorical exposition. Through its mediation, the two levels of interpretation are no longer disconnected in the eyes of the reader but emerge seamlessly from each other. It is easy for the exegete to show, with the help of etymology, how the spiritual sense is implicit in the literal sense within the very letters’ (Klinck 1970: 165).

exegesis (for this, see Chapter 6), it is fitting to make a few preliminary remarks on the topic, considering that etymology was seen as an indispensable instrument for discovering non-literal meanings by way of the letter. What a word means most fundamentally and literally is established through the definition of substance – it is the word's natural signification (although, interestingly, in this sense the literal meaning is not really based on the letter, that is, the physical form of the word, but on the incorporeal substance). The definition of etymology and of sound, which we may group together since they are only differentiated in a handful of texts, open avenues for creative, non-literal interpretation by exploiting the conventional, formal resources of language. The etymologist establishes two points on a plane: point A is the word under scrutiny, e.g. *eclais* 'church'; point B is the suggested phonological parallel, e.g. *ecan-chlas* 'assembly of wisdom'. Both have their own literal meaning. Allegory or, more broadly, figurative meaning, enters this semantic space when a line is drawn to connect A and B: church is not an assembly of wisdom literally but, given the role of the church as the primary source and purveyor of education in the medieval world, it can be understood as such figuratively, by means of logical reasoning and interpretation.

As Mark Amsler (1989: 201) observed regarding the etymological practices of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, etymology exists on the border between the corporeal and the incorporeal, mirroring one in the other. Literal meanings are a launching pad for figurative interpretations. This is seconded by Del Bello (2007: 108): 'At a lexical level, etymologies open up interpretative routes that allegory follows and ratifies at higher discursive levels. De facto, etymologies function as the linguistic pillars on which allegory builds its interpretative edifice'. Thus, etymology successfully communicates between the physical and the metaphysical aspects of language and, in doing so, unfolds richly connected semantic networks out of simple letter and sound combinations.

### *Etymology and the Naturalism of Naming*

In the previous section we have observed, somewhat paradoxically, that the incorporeal 'substance' of a word constitutes its natural meaning, while the corporeal letter or 'sound', extracts figurative meanings from forms created by human convention. This conclusion appears to contradict the foundational principles of Stoic etymology, namely that there exists a certain isomorphism

between things and words that signify them and that, therefore, word-as-form possesses natural meaning, extractable by means of etymological analysis (Lloyd 1971: 64–5; Irvine 1994: 35–6).

In order to address this apparent difficulty, we need to consider the blueprint of all western philosophy of language – Plato’s *Cratylus*. It contains the roots of Stoic etymologising and, although for Plato himself etymology was not yet as systematised a method as it was for the Stoics, the dialogue does articulate the assumption that the relationship between the signifier and the signified within the linguistic sign may not be arbitrary (cf. Long 2005: 38–40). The hypothetical name-givers – those who authoritatively devised all languages at the dawn of human history – took it upon themselves to capture and embody the essence (*οὐσία*) of things in their names (Sedley 2003: 29). While this idea seems to conclusively prove the connection between words and nature, Plato’s stance on the epistemological potential of etymology remains highly ambiguous. On the one hand, he suggests that the essence of a thing can be adequately represented in sounds and syllables.<sup>190</sup> On the other hand, however, he denies that the word’s reference can be bound by one finite form:

[A]nd whether the same meaning is expressed in one set of syllables or another makes no difference; and if a letter is added or subtracted, that does not matter either, so long as the essence of the thing named remains in force and is made plain in the name (*Crat.* 393d1; LCL 167: 40–1).

John Joseph (2000: 45) interpreted this ambiguity as Plato’s way of saying that ‘any number of correct words are conceivable for an object, so long as they capture its essence and make it plain’.<sup>191</sup> Thus words, for Plato, just as other objects in the physical world, are merely imperfect reflections of immaterial realities, the universal Forms, whose essence they strive to capture.

A distant echo of the idea that words have the capacity to signify naturally and objectively can be found in the Hiberno-Latin treatise *Liber de ordine creaturarum*

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<sup>190</sup> ‘Then, my dear friend, must not the lawgiver also know how to embody in the sounds and syllables that name which is fitted by nature for each object? Must he not make and give all his names with his eye fixed upon the absolute or the ideal name, if he is to be an authoritative giver of names?’ (*Crat.* 389d4; LCL 167: 26–7).

<sup>191</sup> See also Timothy Baxter’s (1992: 75–6) interpretation that one word can be etymologised in multiple ways, whereby the choice of semantic aspects of a word to be highlighted is an arbitrary decision by the etymologist.

written in the second half of the seventh century by an Irish author.<sup>192</sup> It offers a sweeping overview of the entire creation and, among other things, touches upon the nine orders of celestial beings. As befitting a scholar of his time, the author provides brief etymologies for the more difficult Hebrew and Greek names: the Seraphim are ‘the flaming ones’ (*ardentes*), the archangels are the ‘highest messengers’ (*summi nuntii*), the word Cherubim means ‘abundance of knowledge’ (*scientiae multitudo*) etc. (*DOC* II.4–5, 11; ed. Díaz y Díaz 1972: 92, 94; trans. Smyth 2011: 168–9). The author then adds that none of these beings have individual names and are always referred to by their collective name because they share one nature:

*Porro in his sciendum est quod, quandocumque nominantur, ex officiorum proprietate quando ad homines ueniunt sumere uocabula, quia illa supernorum ciuium summa societas propriis nominibus non indiget* (*DOC* II.13; ed. Díaz y Díaz 1972: 96.73–6).

[It should also be known of all these that whenever they are given a name, they acquire this name from the nature of their services when they come to men – for this lofty society of the celestial citizens has no need of individual names (trans. Smyth 2011: 169)].

Thus, the celestial orders have their names *ex officiorum proprietate* ‘from the nature of [their] services’, and since all members of an order perform the same function there is no need to name them individually – the collective name is already adequate in capturing their essence. This idea is further developed in a later chapter dedicated to the devil and demons where the author suggests that when the nature of a thing or a creature changes, the name must necessarily change with it. Although they started out as angels, demons can no longer be called that because of their fall: *quemadmodum etenim merita, sic et nomina motauerunt et loca* ‘As their merit changed, so did their name and location’ (*DOC* VIII.1; ed. Díaz y Díaz 1972: 134.6–7; trans. Smyth 2011: 183). It appears, therefore, that the author of *De ordine creaturarum* espouses a loosely Platonic stance on the relationship between words and things.

At first glance, this example seems to confirm that linguistic forms are predetermined by nature. However, another interesting tenet of Plato’s theory of language is his suggestion that it is not in the form, but rather in the meaning of a word where the relationship with its essence should be sought: ‘the man who knows

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<sup>192</sup> For a comprehensive summary of the existing arguments for an Irish author, see Smyth (2011: 139–56).

about names considers their value (*δύναμις*) and is not confused if some letter is added, transposed, or subtracted, or even if the force (*δύναμις*) of the name is expressed in entirely different letters' (*Crat.* 394b; LCL 167: 42–3).<sup>193</sup> Plato illustrates this idea with an example of a physician's drugs which to his patients may look different due to their different colours and perfumes but are the same to a physician who knows their medicinal value. As Joseph (2000: 47) rightfully remarked, this idea is a difficult one to grasp: not only does it blur the line between naturalism and conventionalism but also suggests that the essence captured in a word is not the same as its meaning. However, I would argue that Plato's position presents the same type of difficulty that we have encountered in Irish material. Indeed, it is reminiscent of the way in which Irish grammarians identify the definition of substance as the one expressing a natural relationship between the signifier and the signified.

If this position is accepted, the following question arises: if word-as-form loses its status as an accurate rendering of the nature of its referent, is etymology still capable of uncovering links between language and reality? Of course, in practice the question does not present itself as urgently. Moreover, Mark Amsler (1989: 79–80, 204–6) made a compelling case for the idea that the construction of language on the most general level is still firmly grounded in the extralinguistic world: compounds, for example, cannot exist unless they reflect a real-world connection between certain objects. I would like to draw attention to one further aspect of Irish etymological practice which blurs the distinction between the Stoic idea of corporeality of meaning and Platonic idealism. While a detailed discussion of Irish vocabulary for signification is still forthcoming, it is fitting to address one of these terms here. It is the word *inne*, an abstract noun formed from the preposition *i* 'in' (Breatnach 1983: 18; Lindeman 1999: 155–6). The entry in *eDIL* specifies that its original meaning was 'the inmost part of anything, the middle, the essence, the content' and that, when used in the sense of 'inmost part', it is often found in etymological glosses (*eDIL*, s.v. *inne*). Such usage is also frequent in the *Auraicept* where it introduces the 'separated' etymologies, for example: *seachta [...] seacht nae a hinni* 'heptad [...] seven sciences is the meaning of it' (*Auraic.* 741–2); *fidh [...]*

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<sup>193</sup> Compare this stance to Isidore's who insists that the 'force' (*vis*) of a word is revealed precisely through etymological analysis: *Nam dum videris unde ortum est nomen, cuius vim eius intellegis* '[F]or when you have seen whence a word has originated, you understand its force more quickly' (*Etym.* I.xxix.2; trans. Barney et al. 2006: 55).

*fo edh a hinni* ‘letter [...] “under law” its meaning’ (*Auraic*. 762); *alt dano onni alteir menmain a inne* ‘alt, then, from that which is nurtured in his mind is its meaning’ (*Auraic*. 827); *etargaire [...] etargnaghudh gotha a inne* ‘inflection [...] interpreting of voice is its meaning’ (*Auraic*. 844–5).<sup>194</sup>

In certain contexts, *inne* comes to mean ‘etymology’. This is the case in the ‘Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter’ where *inne* is used in two identically constructed phrases offering etymologies of the word *beatus* ‘blessed’:

*Dorími dono Seregius inni n-aili n-and, edón ‘beatus quasi vivatus’. Atá aní beatus amal bíd ‘beóaigne’ [...]. Airecar ainm n-écomtig hisin cethramud ceniul inna sulbairé rómáinta, edón bes, ocus ‘vita’ donintái. Bíd verbum asé .i. beo [...]. Beatus a randgabáil sechmadachta. [...]*

*Dorími dano Cassiodorus inni n-aili n-and .i. ‘beatus quasi bene aptus’ .i. amal bíd cain-ullmaigthe in dí saighti.*

[Sergius, however, mentions another sense, to wit, *beatus quasi vivatus*. *Beatus* as if it were ‘vivified’ [...]. There is found a rare noun in the fourth kind of Roman rhetoric, to wit, *bes*, and *vita* translates it. There is a verb from it, to wit, *beo* [...]. *Beatus* [is] its past participle. [...]

Cassiodorus, however, mentions another sense, to wit, *beatus quasi bene aptus*, that is, ‘well adapted’, as it were are the two etymologies (OIT 434–49)].

Meyer’s translation does not reflect the specific sense in which *inne* is used here but it is clear from the context that it refers to the ‘inner’ meaning hidden within the word *beatus* which can be brought to light by means of ‘separating’ it and opening it up. That the author intentionally uses *inne* in this sense is evident from the juxtaposition with the seemingly synonymous term *cíall* ‘meaning’ which occurs in similar grammatical constructions but refers to meaning as authoritative interpretation of a textual problem, not etymology, as will be discussed in Chapter 5 (p. 179).<sup>195</sup>

The core meaning of *inne* as the inmost part also provides scholars with suitable spatial imagery. The author of the ‘Old Irish Treatise’ uses vocabulary of motion –

<sup>194</sup> Note also that the description of *bétrae n-etarscartha* in the *Auraicept* cited earlier (p. 150) also makes a point of using *inne* when it is said that the technique helps to break words apart ‘through analysing their meaning’ (*triana n-inde taithmeach*). In light of the foregoing discussion, it becomes clear that *inne* here refers to the notion of quality which is shared between the word and its extralinguistic reference.

<sup>195</sup> For example: *Asbert dano Grigoir céill n-aili and, a bráithrea. Asbert dano Cirine céill n-aili and* ‘Gregory, however, gives another sense, o brethren. Jerome also gives another sense’ (OIT 405–6). In this instance, the author tries to solve the question as to why the phrase *beatus vir* is construed without a verb, that is, the attention is on the meaning intended by the writer of the text (in this case, the Psalmist) rather than on meaning as an object of etymological enquiry.



the verb *téit* ‘goes’ and the verbal noun *saigid* ‘act of approaching, attaining’ – to drive home the point that etymological analysis tangibly paves the way towards the meaning that is immanent within the word:

*Cindas tíagar ina n-inni de?*

[How is their meaning arrived at? (OIT 297–8)].

*Cate saigid inne isindí as beatus?*

[What is the etymology in the word *beatus*? (OIT 420–1; translation modified)].

The phrase *cate saigid inne* in the second example can be literally translated as ‘what is the attaining of meaning’ or ‘how is the meaning attained’.<sup>196</sup> Further application of the metaphor can be found in the Würzburg and Milan glosses where the formula *nessa do inni* ‘nearer to the sense’ is used (Wb. 4b11; Ml. 46c18, 54a11). Thus *inne* refers to the type of signification located at the core of a word.

The Milan glosses further reinforce the naturalist overtones of the term by emphasising that the *inne* of the reference is reflected in the form of the word. When their main text, i.e. Theodore of Mopsuestia’s commentary on the Psalms, points out that *multa namque apud Hebraeos inueniuntur quae ex rebus sibi insitis nomen accipiunt* ‘many things are found among the Hebrews which take their name from the things inherent in them’ (CCSL 88A: 77.91–3), the glossator clarifies:

*.i. intan asrubartmar disaindilsetaid cech réta asrubartmar hisuidi isfodobertar inna anman fon na inni fordi[n]grat* (Ml. 37a14).

[i.e. when we spoke of the special characteristic of every thing, we said therein that it is in accordance with that that the names are given, [namely] in accordance with the qualities that they signify].<sup>197</sup>

The gloss straightforwardly identifies *inne* as the inherent quality or *sain-dílsetu* ‘special property’ of a thing which is signified naturally by its name. This approach sanctions the immanence of meaning in things and, by extension, in words. This view is firmly situated within the Stoic tradition, as received and transmitted by Isidore who contrasts natural signification of words which received their name *secundum qualitatem, qua genita sunt* ‘according to their innate qualities’ with the

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<sup>196</sup> On the uses of *inne* in etymological context, see also Russell (1988: 22–5).

<sup>197</sup> Compare to a similar gloss Ml. 37a12: *.i. amal mbis inne neich sluinde inna anman issamlid dobertar anman doib la ebreu* ‘i.e. as is the quality of anything that the names signify, it is thus that the names are given to them among the Hebrews’.

etymologically impenetrable meanings of words which were created *iuxta arbitrium humanae voluntatis* 'by the caprice of human will' (*Etym.* I.xxix.3; trans. Barney et al. 2006: 55).

Clearly, *inne* in vernacular sources acquired a well-defined technical meaning. Pierre-Yves Lambert (2016: 93–4) aptly observed that it became a vernacular equivalent of Latin *qualitas*. A good indication of this is the fact that among its total 27 attestations in the St Gall corpus it directly glosses *qualitas* on six occasions.<sup>198</sup> This fact concurs with our previous observations about *inne* and, at the same time, raises an important complication. It is of the same variety as the one that taints the usage of most concepts borrowed from logic, namely the lack of a definitive and consistent application. We have encountered this difficulty in the first chapter where Sedulius and Eriugena clashed on their understanding of accident as a philosophical notion. Quality is likewise a notoriously ambiguous concept when used in grammatical texts. Earlier in this chapter, the author of *Ars Bernensis* grappled with the relationship between substance and quality (viz. the interchangeable use of *definitio secundum substantiam qualitatis* and *definitio secundum qualitatem substantiae*; cf. p. 133). Even Priscian himself is not without fault: Anneli Luhtala (2005: 84–97) analysed his treatment of *qualitas* and came to the conclusion that it oscillates between Stoic materialism where qualities are considered to be corporeal, Aristotelian notion of abstract qualities and a more general, not strictly philosophical view that qualities can originate from the mind, body or external circumstances (*GL* II 60.15–18).

It is this latter, more eclectic approach that we also find in Irish sources. So, for example, *inne* sometimes refers to corporeal qualities such as strength in the Milan glosses (*i. huan inni ind nert rothecht* 'i.e. from the quality of the strength that He had'; *Ml.* 37b27) or colour in St Gall, where black and white, given as examples of qualities in Priscian's text, are glossed with *ar inni a ndéde-so* 'for quality, these two' (*Sg.* 28b13=28b18y). At the same time, incorporeal entities also possess *inne*: *i. is inne so inna ermiten* 'i.e. this is the quality of the honor' (*Ml.* 67c7). Most frequent examples of *inne*, however, are the moral qualifications of good and evil, as evidenced in the Milan and St Gall corpora.<sup>199</sup> This is also the case in the *Auraicept* which continues the already familiar spatial metaphor whereby *inne* is something

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<sup>198</sup> *Sg.* 28a1=28a2a, 28a2=28a3b, 39a32=39a33ll, 61a4=61a14f, 201a1=201a2e, 211a1=211a11e.

<sup>199</sup> *Ml.* 71b4; *Sg.* 27a4=27a9i, 39a32=39a33ll.

that is hidden within the word: *Is i in inni co fester in inni uilc no maithiusa bis fond focul* ‘That is the quality, that it might be known whether it is a quality of evil or good that underlies the word’ (*Auraic*. 1904–5; cf. 674).<sup>200</sup> In this line of thinking, the word does function as some form of objective representation of its referent’s properties, but there is no confirmation that these properties are corporeal. It therefore follows that *inne* as that which most tangibly links the world of things and the world of language cannot be definitively identified either as a strictly corporeal phenomenon or as a fully ideal entity. One indisputable conclusion that can be made regarding the term *inne* is that it denotes a type of meaning which exists outside the human mind, be it in the things themselves or as an objective incorporeal idea.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter set out to explore formal methods of analysing a word’s meaning advocated and used by Irish scholars. It has been shown that the increasingly complex classifications of the types of definitions can be considered an Irish contribution to early medieval grammar. The idea behind the theory of definitions speaks to the desire of Irish intellectuals to develop a systematic approach to signification, segmenting its various aspects with the aim of creating a universal method of characterising and comprehending technical concepts. This task, however, proved to be more difficult to achieve in practice than in theory, and not all of the proposed types enjoyed equal application in grammatical works of the period. The earliest pair of substance and sound became the most viable as it allowed for the simple distinction between form and content.

The definition of sound received further extension in the etymological definition the difference between which, though subtle, seems to consist in the scope of their semantic inferences: where the definition of sound observes simple formal similarities between different words, the etymological definition exploits the exegetical potential of these similarities.

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<sup>200</sup> The metaphor of meaning ‘underlying’ the word has also been discussed above at pp. 40–1, 112. For a detailed discussion of this portion of the *Auraic*cept titled *Do ernailibh in imchomairc* ‘On the Divisions of *imchomarc*’, see Hayden (2017). The text suggests that *imchomarc* ‘analysis’ or ‘enquiry’ can be divided into *imchomarc iar n-inni* ‘*imchomarc* according to meaning’ and *imchomarc iar n-airbhirt* ‘*imchomarc* according to use’, each of which is divided into further categories, among which are *folad* ‘substance’, *áirem* ‘number’, *inne* ‘quality’, *inchosc* ‘denotation’ etc. These distinctions appear to bear some connection to the Hiberno-Latin theory of definitions but the nature of this connection requires further analysis.

A large portion of the chapter was dedicated to etymology as a practice that underpins early Irish theories of language. We have discovered that one of the tenets of Stoic and medieval etymologising, namely the natural relationship between words and things and the idea that words serve as accurate representations of their referents, undergoes interesting transformations in Irish material. So, the theory of definitions seems to postulate that the natural relationship only obtains on the level of incorporeal meaning or substance while word-as-form is an entity created by human convention. This fact, however, does not put the epistemological potential of etymology in doubt. On the contrary, the arbitrary nature of language may have been seen as an encouragement to explore formal connections in more unrestrained ways. Without a strict requirement for a one-to-one correspondence between form and its derivation, it was possible to propose multiple etymologies for a single word, drawing on the resources of multiple languages. Each such etymology contributed to the complex semantic network forming around a single concept, elucidating various aspects of a word's meaning. The practice of *béirae n-etarscartha* served for extracting these various etymologies from a word by breaking it apart and 'taking out' the meanings found therein. A close examination of the term *inne* made this metaphor explicit. Its usage in vernacular sources openly suggests that meaning obtained by means of etymological analysis is the inmost part of the word. Finally, it has been pointed out that, regardless of whether etymology was seen as reflecting a natural meaning immanent within word-as-form, the concept of *inne* represents signification as an objective entity which operates independently of the human mind. This is what distinguishes it most clearly from other notions of linguistic meaning which are in various ways linked to the language user's cognition and which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: Meaning beyond Form

### *On Sense and Reference*

The previous chapter focused on the problem of how words signify things. Now, gradually progressing along the scale of (im)materiality, we arrive at the question: how do words signify thoughts and ideas?

One of the postulates of etymology is that words as physical entities reflect the nature of their extralinguistic referents. Thus the problem of signification becomes a question of corporeal, mimetic correspondences between words and things. This, however, is a rather limiting approach to linguistic meaning. Indeed, philosophy of language as a discipline produced many attempts to abstract signification from the formal aspects of language. Some of the classical and medieval approaches to this problem will be examined in this chapter but, for a start, we may once again turn to modern scholarship for initial guidance. A valuable point of reference for discussing meaning is Gottlob Frege's influential article *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* (Frege 1892; trans. 1997). It focuses on the simple yet effective idea that the meaning of a word is not the same as the object to which it refers. In Frege's terminology, these two are designated by the terms *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, or 'sense' and 'reference'. The relationship between the two is straightforward: 'the *Bedeutung* of a sign is an object perceivable by the senses', whereas *Sinn* can be defined as the intelligible content of said sign (Frege 1997: 152–5). *Sinn* is a Platonically objective sense that exists outside of human mind and is the same for all people speaking a given language (Frege 1997: 154). All linguistic signs have this immaterial *Sinn*, even if they lack a perceivable, corporeal referent, or *Bedeutung*. A third key concept in Frege's paradigm is *Vorstellung* 'idea' which represents the subjective dimension of signification. It is a mental image that each person forms internally 'from memories of sense impressions' (Frege 1997: 154). What Frege's paradigm contributes to the present discussion is a simple but effective classification of the types of meaning. This chapter will focus on conceptions of meaning that approximate Frege's *Sinn* and *Vorstellung*.

Other helpful frameworks for thinking about meaning as an intelligible entity can be found in classical and late antique thought. An overview of these frameworks constitutes the first section of the chapter. Afterwards, the discussion is divided into three strands. The first two consider Irish approaches to meaning as a product of an

individual mind (*Vorstellung*) and as an objective entity (*Sinn*). The final section offers two case-studies from the Old Irish glosses which examine how these views on meaning were incorporated into the theory and practice of translation – an activity predicated on understanding and manipulating meaning.

### ***Classical Approaches to Meaning and Cognition***

It has been briefly observed in the previous chapter that Plato's stance on etymology is somewhat ambiguous: he does not reject its value outright, but he is sceptical of the idea that words can accurately reflect the essences of things on a formal level. Instead, he seems to suggest that, if a natural relationship between words and ideal Forms does exist, it must be confined to the level of pure meaning, beyond sounds and letters (Joseph 2000: 47). It follows that, according to Plato, meaning can be entirely abstracted from the physical properties of language and in this 'disembodied' state enjoys some form of objective existence.

An equally fundamental account of signification is that found in Aristotle's *Peri hermeneias* 'On Interpretation' and mediated to the Latin West by Boethius. A brief passage from this work became a cornerstone for many subsequent theories of meaning. Below I give the translation of Aristotle's Greek text and Boethius' Latin rendering of the passage:

Now spoken sounds are **symbols** (*σύμβολα*) of **affections in the soul** (*τῶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ παθημάτων*), and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of (*σημεῖα*) – affections of the soul – are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of – actual things – are also the same. (*Perih.* 16a3–8; trans. Ackrill 1963: 43; cf. LCL 325: 114).

*Sunt ergo ea quae sunt in voce earum quae sunt in anima passionum notae, et ea quae scribuntur eorum quae sunt in voce. Et quemadmodum nec litterae omnibus eaedem, sic nec voces eaedem; quorum autem hae primorum notae, eaedem omnibus passiones animae et quorum hae similitudines, res etiam eaedem* (PHI 3.5–11).<sup>201</sup>

Boethius's translation is overall faithful to Aristotle's text.<sup>202</sup> Since early medieval intellectuals only knew Aristotle through Boethius' eyes, the subsequent comments

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<sup>201</sup> References to Boethius' Latin translation of and commentary on *Peri hermeneias* are to the volume, page and line number in Karl Meiser's edition (Meiser 1877–80). For a critique of Meiser's editorial treatment of this specific passage, see Magee (1989: 50–1).

<sup>202</sup> The only major discrepancy is Boethius' erasure of Aristotle's distinction between *σύμβολον* 'symbol' ('symbols of affections of the soul') and *σημεῖον* 'sign' ('signs of affections of the soul') rendering both as Latin *nota* (*notae passionum animae*). See Magee (1989: 51–2), Suto (2012: 42).

will be predominantly concerned with Boethius' Latin terminology. The passage itself outlines the order of signification: written marks (*quae scribuntur*) represent speech sounds (*quae sunt in voce*) which, in turn, are signs (*notae*) of affections of the soul (*passiones quae sunt in anima*), and the affections of the soul are likenesses of the actual things (*res*). While written and spoken signs differ across languages, these 'affections', as well as their real world referents, are universal. In other words, the Aristotelian view of meaning advocates conventionalism in the relation between form and sense and naturalism in respect to the relationship between sense and reference (Modrak 2001: 19).

Boethius translates Aristotle's 'passions of the soul' (*τῆ ψυχῆ πάθηματα*) sometimes literally as *passiones animae* and sometimes as *conceptiones animi* 'conceptions of the mind'. He clarifies in his commentary that they should really be understood as *intellectus* 'thoughts': *Praeter intellectum namque vox penitus nihil designat* 'Besides a thought, a spoken word signifies absolutely nothing' (*PH II 21.4–5*). Boethius is also conscious of the difference of this position from the view advanced by Platonists. He informs his readers that the followers of Plato understand words to refer to *naturae incorporeae* 'incorporeal natures' (*PH II 26.25–27.4*; cf. Suto 2012: 27–9). While the Aristotelian 'passions' or *intellectus* are equally incorporeal and universal for all people, the two factions disagree on the locus of signification: Platonic meaning aims for the metaphysical realm of Forms, while Aristotle places it inside the human mind. In Fregean terms, whereas Platonic meaning is *Sinn* ('sense'), Aristotelian meaning is *Vorstellung* ('idea'). Deborah Modrak (2001: 19–27) characterised Aristotle's 'passions of the souls' as 'mental states' caused by objects of perception. John Magee (1989: 114) similarly concluded that for Boethius 'an *intellectus* is either a thought, or the faculty of thought (mind, intellect)'.

Boethius develops this idea further by suggesting that thought has a linguistic matrix. He refers to mental processes as *oratio animi atque intellectus* 'the speech of the mind and of thought' (*PH II 24.24*) and talks about mental nouns and verbs which can be combined to produce a proposition in the mind just as is done in spoken and written language. According to Boethius, there are three kinds of speech: written, oral and *quae coniungeretur in animo* 'the one which is connected in the mind' (*PH II 30.3–5*). Each kind functions on similar bases, by using the principal parts of speech, i.e. nouns and verbs, albeit of different varieties: *erunt alia verba et nomina quae scribantur, alia quae dicantur, alia quae tacita mente tractentur* 'verbs

and nouns that are written will be different from those that are spoken and different still from those that are handled silently in the mind' (*PH* II 30.9–10).<sup>203</sup> Boethius thus introduces a powerful heuristic analogy between thought and language (cf. Chapter 7).

Without going deeper into the tenets of Aristotelian theory of meaning, an important idea that we may take on board is that meanings subsist within the mind as conceptual representations of extralinguistic and extramental objects.

At the beginning of Chapter 3, reference was made to the model offered in Augustine's *De dialectica* of the four entities involved in semantic operations: *verbum*, *dicibile*, *dictio* and *res* (pp. 92–4). To recapitulate, *verbum* in this scheme denotes word-as-form, divorced from meaning, or, more specifically, the phonological word. *Dicibile* is what we may call the semantic word, that is, the conceptual content of a word, divorced from its formal properties. *Dictio* is the combination of the two, the unity of sound and sense – a functional linguistic sign. Finally, *res* remains as the extralinguistic referent of a word. All of these categories have been addressed, in one way or another, in previous chapters except for *dicibile*.<sup>204</sup> It is worth rehearsing Augustine's description of the concept here:

*Quidquid autem ex verbo non aures sed animus sentit et ipso animo tenetur inclusum, dicibile vocatur. [...] Quod dixi dicibile, verbum est, nec tamen verbum, sed **quod in verbo intellegitur et animo continetur**, significat.*

[Now that which the mind not the ears perceives from the word and which is held within the mind itself is called a *dicibile*. [...] '*Dicibile*' is a word; however, it does not signify a word but **what is understood in the word and contained in the mind** (Aug. *De dial.* V.8)].

Augustine's *dicibile* corresponds rather transparently to the Stoic notion of *lekton*, both meaning literally 'that which can be said' or 'sayable'.<sup>205</sup> In Stoic theory of language, the notion of *lekton* is somewhat problematic. For Stoics, only material objects can be truly said to exist. There is, however, no doubt that *lekta* are understood to be incorporeal. A. C. Lloyd (1971: 65) aptly referred to this

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<sup>203</sup> This might be an echo of Aristotle's statement that 'a noun or a verb by itself much resembles a concept of thought which is neither combined nor disjointed' (*Perih.* 16a13–14; LCL 325: 116–17). On Boethius' concept of mental speech, see Suto (2012: 91–4).

<sup>204</sup> The idea of a phonological word is the subject of Chapter 1 (pp. 38–45); *dictio* and comparable Irish notions of the word as a combination of sound and sense have been examined in Chapter 3 (pp. 95–123); the relationship between words and things has been addressed in the discussion of etymology in Chapter 4 (pp. 145–61).

<sup>205</sup> Long (2005: 52–3) pointed out that the Latin term is unattested before Augustine and is rare in subsequent usage which suggests that it is a linguistic calque created by Augustine himself.



contradiction as ‘a latent and unacknowledged conflict between the Stoic theory of meaning and the Stoic theory of etymology’. Indeed, in etymology both the word and its real world reference exist as physical objects. But the entity that mediates between the two – *lekton* – is very elusive. *Lekta* do not exist in the same way as words and things do but, at the same time, they are not entirely mind-based and are, in this way, not like Aristotle’s ‘passions of the soul’ (Lloyd 1971: 64–5; Long 1971: 84–90; cf. Graeser 1978: 87–97). Sextus Empiricus defined *lekton* as ‘the actual thing (τὸ πρᾶγμα) [...] which we apprehend as existing in dependence on our intellect’ (*Adv. Math.* VIII.12; LCL 291: 244–7).<sup>206</sup> Thus, in placing *lekta* ‘in dependence’ on the intellect (τῆ ἡμετέρᾳ παρνοφισταμένου διανοίᾳ) rather than inside it, the Stoics awarded *lekton* with some form of objectivity. Benson Mates (1961: 22) compared *lekton* with Frege’s *Sinn* in that both represent objective and public content of subjective and private thought.

Returning to Augustine, his description of *dicibile* leans more into Aristotelian psychologism when he describes it as *quod in uerbo intellegitur et animo continetur* ‘what is understood in the word and contained in the mind’. A. A. Long (2005: 53) likewise observed that Augustine’s *dicibile* ‘is something purely mental in its content and apprehension, irrespective of its metaphysical status’. Thus, Augustine’s approach presents an amalgam of Aristotelian and Stoic theories of meaning.

### ***Cíall and intlecht: Meaning between Mind and Language***

The vocabulary for talking about linguistic meaning is remarkably rich in Old Irish. Scholars writing in the vernacular had at their disposal at least four terms that primarily denote ‘meaning’ or ‘sense’: two vernacular, *cíall* and *inne*, and two borrowings from Latin, *intlecht* (from *intellectus*) and *síans* (from *sensus*). These four terms cover various facets of the concept of meaning. Pierre-Yves Lambert (2016) analysed the specificities of their use in two Old Irish gloss corpora: Milan and St Gall. He was able to observe a number of stable patterns of usage for these terms. So, for example, *cíall*, the most common of the four terms, denotes the meaning of a word in a general sense or the meaning of a sentence. It shares these two applications with *intlecht*. Besides that, it can signify the meaning of morphemes or, in exegetical context, designates the interpretation of a biblical passage as distinct from the passage itself. *Intlecht* is frequently associated with the idea of

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<sup>206</sup> For different translations of this passage, see also Mates (1961: 11), Long (2005: 52–3).

completeness or fullness of sense of a sentence, a complete thought (Lambert 2016: 92, 94). The term *síans* or *séis* has a specialised application in vernacular exegetical discourse and is consistently used to refer to spiritual or non-literal interpretation of the Bible (Lambert 2016: 89). Lastly, the term *inne*, as was discussed in the previous chapter, emphasises the inherent quality of an object rather than any transcendent meaning (Lambert 2016: 93–4).

This section will concentrate on the idea of meaning as an abstract entity and an object of human cognition. To this end, the terms *cíall* and *intlecht* will be given closer scrutiny. This is because they share an important feature: their semantic field includes both signification and cognition. Like its Latin counterpart, *intlecht* denotes both ‘meaning’ and ‘thought, understanding’; similarly, the two primary senses of *cíall* are ‘meaning’ and ‘mind’. We shall examine how this ambiguity plays out in the usage of the two terms.

#### *Observations on Semantic Variation*

*Cíall* is the most frequently attested word for ‘meaning’ in both the Milan and St Gall corpora, appearing in 55 glosses in the former and in 45 glosses in the latter. It is therefore not surprising that as the most common term it has a variety of different usages. It is important to point out a few of the less obvious ones. Interestingly, approximately half of its attestations in St Gall provide *cíall* with a rather specific grammatical meaning whereby it refers to categories of grammatical analysis in phrases like *ciall chésto* ‘the sense of a passive’ (Sg. 140a5=140a31h), *ciall gníma* ‘meaning of action’ (Sg. 148b18=148b42ii), *ciall preteriti plusquamperfecti* ‘the sense of a preteritum plusquamperfectum’ (Sg. 151a4=151a26l).<sup>207</sup> On a few occasions, this usage is also applied to *intlecht*.<sup>208</sup> A handful of glosses build a bridge between this grammatically determined meaning and a word’s semantic content. Here *cíall* is used to refer to the most general semantic field of a word or a morpheme: *ciall atraib* ‘the meaning of possession’ in the genitive case (Sg. 209b32=209b28ab), the meaning of proximity in the Latin prefix *ad-* (Sg.

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<sup>207</sup> This usage, though less frequent, is also present in the Milan glosses which suggests that it was not limited to grammatical discourse (cf. Ml. 67d24, 68c14, 98c10).

<sup>208</sup> Cf. Sg. 39a1=39a5c, 148b7=148b21i, 201a2=201a3g.

217a2=217a19h), *cíall chomthinóil* ‘the sense of collection’ in the Greek preposition *σύν* ‘with’ (Sg. 222a3=222a14g).<sup>209</sup>

It has been mentioned that one of the core meanings of *cíall* is ‘mind’ or ‘intelligence’. While it is not very prominent in the St Gall corpus, the Würzburg and the Milan glosses make sufficient use of it. The Würzburg glossator, for instance, comments on the phrase *homines corrupti mente* (2 Tim. 3:8) with *.i. druáilnithe acíall* ‘i.e. corrupted (is) their mind’ (Wb. 30c18). The glossator of Milan shows that *cíall* can acquire a more specific meaning of mental resolve or intention: *annungebtais .i. robu si ácial són* ‘when they were about to take [Jerusalem], i.e. that was their thought’ (Ml. 95a9).

A curious idiom that finds frequent use in all three gloss-corpora is the phrase *fris-cuirethar céill* ‘applies (one’s) mind to’ or *frecor céill* ‘applying (one’s) mind to’. This construction appears in eleven glosses in Milan and two each in Würzburg and St Gall.<sup>210</sup> However, its meaning is limited to two specific contexts: divine worship, i.e. applying one’s mind to God, and cultivation in a broad sense, including cultivating skills (Sg. 106b12=106b25x) and cultivating crops (Ml. 137c1; Sg. 35a11=35a38ae). While these idiomatic meanings are at a remove from the base meaning of the term *cíall*, they nevertheless originate in the vocabulary of cognition.

An illuminating and complex example of the cognitive connotations of *cíall* and *intlecht* can be found in ‘O’Davoren’s Glossary’, a collection of citations from Irish legal texts from the seventh and eighth century (Breatnach 2005: 100–8). One of the entries reads: *Dethbir eter conn 7 ceill 7 inntlecht: conn fri forb[th]etaid 7 cíall fri himcomét 7 indtlecht fri etargnugud tuicsina* (leg. *tuicsen*) ‘The difference between *conn* and *cíall* and *intlecht: conn* for perfecting, and *cíall* for preserving, and *intlecht* for distinguishing ideas’ (O’Dav. 755; cf. *CIH* IV 1494.37–8). The triad is formally reminiscent of the threefold models of the soul which were circulating in patristic and early medieval works. Augustine, for example, proposed several threefold schemata of the soul as reflections of the nature of the Trinity, e.g. *mens* ‘mind’ – *notitia* ‘knowledge’ – *amor* ‘love’; *memoria* ‘memory’ – *intelligentia* ‘understanding’ – *voluntas* ‘will’ (*De trin.* IX.iv.4, X.xi.17, XIV.iii.5; *CCSL* 50: 297, 329–30; *CCSL* 50A: 426–7; cf. O’Daly 1987: 7–79; Law 1995: 57–76). In a similar manner, the three

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<sup>209</sup> Similar usage can also be found in the ‘Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter’ which mentions the Greek prefix *διά-* (equivalent to Latin *dis-*) *co céill etarscartha* ‘with a sense of separating’ (OIT 300–1).

<sup>210</sup> See Wb. 11b5, 29d6; Sg. 35a11=35a38ae, 106b12=106b25x.

terms used in our passage, *conn*, *cíall* and *intlecht*, are given specific functions within the schema. *Conn*, which can be translated as ‘reason’ or ‘intelligence’, is said to serve for ‘perfecting’ or ‘completing’ something (*fri forbthetaid*), perhaps in attaining knowledge available through the study of arts.<sup>211</sup> As for *cíall*, its stated function is *imchomét* ‘guarding’ or ‘preserving’. Lambert (2003: 114) cautiously proposed to interpret it, in this context, as ‘memory’ (*mémoire*).<sup>212</sup> While this usage is not common, there exists an idiomatic phrase *do-cuirethar ar chéill* ‘calls to mind’ or ‘keeps in mind’ that conveys the sense of memory or recollection.<sup>213</sup> Understood in this way, *cíall* may represent a faculty that preserves and stores knowledge acquired through *conn*. Another possibility is that *cíall* here refers to some form of moral cognition or perhaps ‘prudence’ as a rational striving for virtue, given that the word *imchomét* may refer to ‘the act of watching over’, specifically ‘to prevent wrongdoing on the part of the person watched’ (*eDIL*, s.v.). Lastly, *intlecht* is said to deal with entirely metaphysical notions as it is meant *fri etargnugud tuiscen* ‘for distinguishing ideas’, in Stokes’ translation. *Tuisce* is a verbal noun of *do-ucci*, a suppletive stem of *do-beir* in the meaning ‘brings’ or, in this context, ‘understands, thinks’. It can thus mean ‘the act of understanding’ or ‘the act of thinking’ and, from there, ‘thought’ or ‘idea’. As for the word *etargnugud*, a closer translation would be ‘interpreting, explaining, making intelligible’ (*eDIL*, s.v.). With this, we may understand the function of *intlecht* as ‘interpreting ideas’ or ‘interpreting thoughts’. It represents the highest level of cognition in this schema, the analytical faculty of the mind.

This tripartite division of mental faculties can be compared with that introduced by Virgilius Maro Grammaticus – a comparison which is helped by the early date of both sources. In Virgilius’ view, the soul likewise comprises three elements, in ascending

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<sup>211</sup> Interestingly, *conn* is twice glossed as *cíall* in the early Middle Irish metrical glossary *Forus Focal: is conn cíall* ‘mind is understanding’ (*FF* 27; my translation) and *conn ainm céille iarmothá* ‘moreover, understanding is the name for mind’ (*FF* 45; my translation). The text is edited in Stokes (1894: 8–22).

<sup>212</sup> If *cíall* does represent the faculty of memory, an interesting counterpart to this idea can be found in a twelfth-century Hiberno-Latin poem *Constet quantus honos* spuriously ascribed to Patrick, bishop of Dublin (d. 1084) where the mind is likewise presented as three-fold, consisting of *intellectus*, *voluntas* and *mentio*. *Mentio* is a rare term that primarily means ‘calling to mind’ but is used to gloss the Greek *μνήμη* ‘memory’ and Latin *memoria* in another text with strong Irish connections: the Greek glossary preserved in Laon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 444 associated with the circle of Martinus Hibernensis. See Boyle (2017: 110; cf. n. 99).

<sup>213</sup> It is attested, for instance, in the Milan glosses: *toralá Dia ar cheill do degnimu* ‘let God bring to mind’ (MI. 43b15). Another example is found in the Middle Irish text *In tenga bithnua* ‘The Evernew Tongue’: *in tan for-athmentar 7 do-curedar ar ceil* ‘when it is remembered and brought to mind’ (*TB* 92). This text is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7 (pp. 260–6).

order of sophistication. The first level is *anima* itself which comprehends natural world through its *ingenium* ‘wit’. The second level is *mens* ‘mind’ which stores experiences and thoughts like an *integrum vas* ‘sturdy pot’ and, besides, *moralia intellegit* ‘understands moral affairs’ (Virg. *Epit.* IV.290–3).<sup>214</sup> The highest level is the realm of *ratio* which *superiora et caelestia perlustrans intellectum [...] possidet* ‘surveys lofty heavenly matters and shelters the understanding’ (Virg. *Epit.* IV.293–5; trans. Law 1995: 70). The similarities to the model presented in ‘O’Davoren’s Glossary’ are rather striking. Here too, the cognitive process starts with acquiring (scientific) knowledge, proceeds to the faculty of *cíall/mens* which combines a mnemonic function with understanding of moral protocols, and culminates in comprehension of incorporeal intelligible ideas.<sup>215</sup> Although it is difficult to say whether the two accounts share a tangible connection, we have previously seen that Virgilius’ teachings have parallels in vernacular linguistic practices that are difficult to dismiss as merely coincidental (cf. pp. 120–3).

Overall, the important conclusion thus far is that there is a clear association of the terms *cíall* and *intlecht* with higher-level mental functions that operate with and process abstract entities, concepts or thoughts. These observations help to inform our understanding of their complex involvement in language-philosophical ideas.

### *Meaning as Thought*

Apart from these additional meanings, the main function of the terms *cíall* and *intlecht* in the glosses is to refer to the semantic content of words and utterances. In this capacity, they denote ‘meaning’ as an intelligible entity in close connection with human cognition. So, for example, the glossator of St Gall interprets Priscian’s definition of *vox articulata*:

*Articulata est, quae coartata, hoc est copulata cum aliquo sensu mentis eius, qui loquitur, profertur (GL II 5.6–7).*

[Articulated [vox] is compressed, that is, it is uttered in combination with a certain meaning in the mind of the speaker].

[gl. *coartata*] .i. *do-immthastar fri slond ñ-intliuchta bís hisin menmain.*

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<sup>214</sup> An interesting parallel to the imagery of the mind as a ‘sturdy pot’ is the eighth-century vernacular treatise ‘Caldron of Poesy’ where a person’s capacity for learning is presented through the metaphor of three cauldrons which can be filled with different types of knowledge, from basic to advanced (cf. Breatnach 1981: 48–52). The ‘Caldron of Poesy’ is also discussed in Chapter 6 (p. 239).

<sup>215</sup> Compare this to Virgilius’ model of the threefold structure of *littera* which likewise reaches the heights of spiritual contemplation (cf. pp. 71–2).

[i.e. it is combined to express the meaning which is in the mind' (Sg. 3a3=3a11m)].

Where Priscian uses the term *sensus* in his text, the glossator re-interprets it as *intlecht* to emphasise the idea that intelligible speech is a product of the mind. This accords with the wider vernacular tradition, specifically with the teaching of *Dliged sésa* whose author likewise suggests that speech sound (*guth*) is begotten by the ambivalent *cíall* – mind/meaning (cf. pp. 33–5 above).

This observation on *vox articulata* is then contrasted with its opposite, *vox inarticulata*:

*Inarticulata est contraria, quae a nullo affectu proficiscitur mentis (GL II 5.7–8).*

[Unarticulated [*vox*] is the opposite, that which proceeds from no mental experience].

[gl. *nullo*] .i. *ni-astaidir 7 ni-timmarcar fri slond n-intliucta*.

[i.e. it is not fastened down and it is not checked to express a meaning] (Sg. 3a4=3a13q)].

[*T*]amen *inarticulatae dicuntur, cum nihil significant (GL II. 5.15).*

[for [those *voces*] are called unarticulated because they signify nothing].

[gl. *inarticulatae*] .i. *neph-thimmorti fri slond n-intliuchta*.

[i.e. not constrained to express a meaning (Sg. 3a8=3a21cc)].

In all three examples cited the glossator uses the same construction: *fri slond n-intliuchta* 'for expressing the meaning'. The choice of *intlecht* on all three occasions, apart from the fact that these glosses were likely modelled on each other due to their proximity in the manuscript, seem to be determined by the emphasis on intelligibility as the main criterion for distinguishing between articulated and unarticulated *vox*.

There is additional evidence to consider this choice of vocabulary as deliberate. An extended remark on the statement that *vox inarticulata* is not intelligible to the mind appears in the three main manuscripts of the 'Irish recension' of Priscian: the already familiar St Gall manuscript as well as Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, BPL 67 and Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Aug. Perg. 132, all from the mid-ninth century. The addition is incorporated into the main text of St Gall (p. 3a23–6) and Leiden (f. 10r12–14) while in the Karlsruhe copy a dedicated

slip of parchment was inserted (f. 3) which contains this short passage and the note *sed in libro romano non habetur* ‘it is not in the Roman book’ (f. 3r1).<sup>216</sup> Rijcklof Hofman (1996: vol. 2, 12) pointed out that the insertion is written in a different hand. The additional remark relates to Priscian’s examples of *vox inarticulata* which are onomatopoeic avian noises *coax, cra* (GL II 5.15). The added text in St Gall reads:

*Eas enim uoces, quanquam intelligimus de quo sint uolucres profectae, tamen inarticulatae dicuntur, quia uox, ut superius, inarticulata est, quae a nullo affectu proficiscitur mentis* (St Gall 904, p. 3a23–6).

[For these *voces*, although we understand from which winged creature they are proceeded, nevertheless are called unarticulated because a *vox* which proceeds from no mental experiences, as [stated] above, is unarticulated].

Not satisfied with interpolating this remark reinforcing the connection between the mind and intelligible speech, the glossators of St Gall further clarify the phrase *affectu mentis* with *.i. intellectu* (Sg. 3a25hh). This demonstrates their resolve to use *intellectus/intlecht* in a way that is quasi-Boethian, presenting ‘thought’ as what constitutes linguistic meaning.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> The same note in vernacular (*ní fail in testimín-so hisind libur romanach* ‘this text is not in the Roman book’ (Sg. 4a12=4a32x)) is added in the St Gall Priscian to the additional text regarding the Chaldeans as the first inventors of letters. Moreover, this passage about Chaldeans is exactly what we find on the verso of the inserted slip of parchment in Karlsruhe (f. 3v). These references to a ‘Roman book’, coupled with identical additions to Priscian’s text seem to suggest that these features are particular to the Irish branch of transmission. If Lambert’s (1996: 191) suggestion that the ‘Roman book’ refers to a continental manuscript in general (rather than one produced specifically in Rome) is correct, then the distinction between insular and continental tradition becomes more delineated. However, Elke Krotz (2015) argued that some of the ‘Irish’ insertions appear in non-Irish manuscripts which may suggest that they are not, in fact, of Irish origin. While her analysis does not include the two additions discussed here, Franck Cinato (2015: 324–5) pointed out parallels to the passage on *vox articulata* in four continental manuscripts. In addition, I have been able to identify four further continental parallels (Paris, BN Lat. 7503, f. 2v; Paris, BN Lat. 7504, f. 2r; Paris BN Lat. 7505, f. 7v; Cologne, Dombibliothek, Cod. 200, f. 2r). In all of them, except one, the passage is added as a marginal gloss. In Paris BN Lat. 7504 it is interpolated into the main text but is highlighted in dots, seemingly to mark its inauthenticity. It should be noted that the transmission of the passage in continental manuscripts might be influenced by Irish tradition. For an examination of parallel glosses in continental and Irish copies of Priscian, see Bauer and Krivoschekova (2022: 86–94).

<sup>217</sup> It should be noted that there is no direct evidence that Boethius’ logical works were known in Ireland at that time. While Ó Néill (2013) showed that the study of Boethius in Ireland started as early as the seventh century, the manuscript evidence points only to the knowledge of his mathematical treatises (*De institutione musica, De institutione geometria*). Solid evidence for the circulation and study of *Consolatio philosophiae* appears in the twelfth century (Ó Néill 2005). However, Boethius’ commentary on *Peri hermeneias* was starting to circulate in Carolingian Europe in the ninth century (cf. Lewry 1981: 103; Gibson 1982: 48). The first surviving glosses on this text are preserved in the manuscript Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, Voss. Lat. F 70, ff. 5v–9r (Marenbon 1993: 83). Bischoff identified it as a production of a West Frankish scriptorium from the third quarter of the ninth century and noted Irish palaeographical features on ff. 44v–48v (1998–2017: vol. 2, 52 no. 2196). John Marenbon (2003: 166) also pointed out that the earliest glosses on Boethius’ commentary on *Isagoge* may be associated with the Irishman Israel Scottus, a tenth-century grammarian. It is therefore not impossible that Irish scholars other than Eriugena could have access, even if a limited one, to Boethius’ logical oeuvre in the Carolingian period. On Eriugena’s knowledge of Boethius, see n. 220 below.

Another important connotation of the term *intlecht* in the St Gall corpus is the idea of fullness of meaning. *Intlecht* shares this application with *cíall*. Both are frequently used in conjunction with such words as *lán* ‘full’, *láine* ‘fullness’ and *línad* ‘the act of filling’. Consider the following examples:

(a) *Oratio est ordinatio dictionum congrua, sententiam perfectam demonstrans* (GL II 53.28–9).

[Speech is the appropriate ordering of words which shows a complete idea (*sententia*)].

[gl. *perfectam*]: .i. *co láni inntsílucho*.

[i.e. with fullness of sense (Sg. 26a9=26a11o)].

(b) *et possessiua quidem egent adiectione nominum ad plenam significationem, primitiva vero non semper* (GL II 581.13–14).

[and indeed, possessive [pronouns] require the addition of nouns for complete meaning, but primary [pronouns do] not always [require it]].

[gl. *ad plenam significationem*]: *dolínad anintliuchta*.

[to complete their sense (Sg. 198b4=198b10f)].

(c) *Itaque huiusmodi verba non egent casu, quamvis auctores haec quoque inveniantur more activo vel passivo diversis casibus adiungentes, sed figurate* (GL II 378.13–15).

[Therefore, verbs of this kind do not require a case, although there are also authors who adjoin them to different cases in an active or a passive mood, but [only] figuratively].

[gl. *casu*]: .i. *huare is lán chiall indib chena*.

[i.e. because it is a full meaning in them without it (Sg. 140b3=140b19g)].<sup>218</sup>

In these examples completeness of meaning pertains both to individual words (b, c) and to full utterances or sentences (a). This could be interpreted in Aristotelian fashion, hinting at the idea that ‘meanings’, understood as thoughts, represent such a state of cognition where a concept or an idea can be grasped in its entirety. John Magee (1989: 98) identified this as a key feature of Boethius’ notion of *intellectus*: ‘Both individual words and complete statements signify things that are completely formed within the mind’. Whether the meaning of a word or an utterance is complete is thus determined by its intelligibility to the mind rather than any external criteria.

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<sup>218</sup> For other examples, see Sg. 151b1=151b1a, 209b30=209b26ww, 209b32=209b28ab, Sg. 210a5=210a11.



That meaning can be understood as an incorporeal intelligible entity is further corroborated by the idea that fullness of sense is not affected by the changes to the physical form of language. Here, some of the earlier considerations explored in Chapter 1 become of relevance again, namely the juxtaposition of sound and sense in various scenarios of irregular morphological formations such as adjectival degrees of comparison or nominal inflection (cf. pp. 42–4). So, for example, *Auraicept na nÉces* introduces the opposition *son – cíall* and suggests that irregular forms of comparison, such as *bonus, melior, optimus*, represent *condelg ceilli cen son* ‘comparison of sense without sound’ (*Auraic.* 698–703). Similarly, *Anonymus ad Cuimnannum* observes that words such as *plebs* ‘folk’ and *gens* ‘people’ *sono sunt singularia, intellectu vero pluralia et diuidua sunt* ‘are singular in sound, but plural and divisible in meaning’ (*Ad Cuimn.* 44.167–70). This suggests that grammarians understood meaning to be detached from form in such a way that the conceptual content of a word is not contingent on its precise phonological manifestation.

The strong connection between meaning and thought obtains in the vernacular tradition outside of the technical discourse of the St Gall glosses. It is not uncommon to find vernacular accounts of thought imagined as a fundamentally linguistic activity. A helpful example of this is found in the Milan corpus, in a pair of glosses one of which has been discussed earlier in relation to the expanded notion of ‘word’ that includes various devotional gestures as a certain *sermo corporis* or *briathar choirp* (Ml. 138a2; cf p. 105 above).<sup>219</sup> The Latin text of Theodore’s Psalm commentary briefly remarks that these bodily ‘words’ are *praeter animum* ‘outside the mind’ (CCSL 88A: 377.12). The glossator takes this as a cue to another observation which is not explicitly prompted by the main text: [gl. *animum*] *.i. airis*

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<sup>219</sup> An interesting comparison that becomes of particular relevance in the context of the theory of signification is Augustine’s description of non-verbal conventional signs in *De doctrina christiana* where he introduces his theory of signs. He divides all signs into natural (*signa naturalia*) and conventional (*signa data*). The distinguishing feature of conventional signs is that they are used by people *ad demonstrandos [...] motus animi sui uel sensa aut intellecta quaelibet* ‘for the purpose of conveying [...] the motion of their minds, or something which they have sensed or understood’ (*De doct. christ.* II.ii.3; CCSL 32: 33.2–3; trans. Robertson 1958: 34–5 (lightly modified)). While language constitutes the most significant portion of all conventional signs, some of them are non-verbal: *Nam cum innuimus, non damus signum nisi oculis eius quem uolumus per hoc signum uoluntatis nostrae participem facere. Et quidam motu manuum pleraque significant: et histriones omnium membrorum motibus dant signa quaedam scientibus, et cum oculis eorum quasi fabulantur [...]; et sunt haec omnia quasi quaedam uerba uisibilia* ‘For when we nod, we give a sign only to the sight of the person whom we wish by that sign to make a participant of our will. Some signify many things through the motions of their hands, and actors give signs to those who understand with the motions of all their members as if narrating things to their eyes [...]. And all of these things are like so many visible words’ (*De doct. christ.* II.3.4; CCSL 32: 34.3–10; trans. Robertson 1958: 35). Thus language becomes a universal metaphor for all processes of meaning exchange between rational subjects.

*imradud álabradsidi in menman* ‘i.e. for the speech of the mind is thought’ (ML. 138a3). Here, thoughts are quite literally imagined as words or utterances in the mind – an idea which resonates with the Aristotelian approach to signification. Thus we are introduced to an idea that will shape the remainder of this section and become central in Chapter 7, namely that thought can be understood, in more or less metaphorical sense, as a kind of language.

That words of speech and words of the mind are inherently connected is an idea that was familiar to Irish scholars through patristic authors. Indeed, here we may once again turn to a passage from the ‘Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter’ which relies on Gregory’s *Homiliae in Ezechielem* for its reflection on the relationship between the inner and outer word (cf. p. 103):

*Ní théchte dúinni tuilled nóibscrepra díanechtair, ol nach tan dofúarcaib int aughtur bréthir for a gin sechtair, bíd bríathar for a menmain frísgair došuidiu, ut dicitur: ‘Illud verbum quod foris protulit illi verbo quod intus latebat coniungit’.*

[It does not behove us to add to the Holy Scripture from without, for whenever the author lets out a word outside his mouth, there is a word in his mind that answers to it, as it is said: ‘That word which he uttered outwardly he connects to the word that was hidden within’ (OIT 408–14; translation lightly modified)].

The idea expressed here belongs to the familiar Aristotelian strand of thought: prior to being uttered or written down, words subsist intellectually in the mind (although in this particular context, it only applies to the minds of those who wrote down the books of the Bible). Again, we see the same message: concepts exist in the mind in the same way as words exist in spoken and written language.

This idea is taken further, and in a direction anticipated by Boethius, by Eriugena. In his fragmentary commentary on Priscian, a work bears a strong influence of his interest in logic, Eriugena notes in a Boethian fashion:<sup>220</sup>

*Est enim oratio mentis conceptio ad res significandas, unde possimus naturaliter definire singulas partes orationis. Verbi gratia. Nomen sic definire possumus: nomen est mentis conceptio ad significandas rerum substantias. Similiter verbum est mentis conceptio ad significandas actus vel passiones substantiae. Est igitur verbum quasi in medio positum inter vocem, quae sonat*

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<sup>220</sup> Connections between Eriugena’s Priscian commentary and Boethius’ commentaries on Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, as well as the pseudo-Aristotelian text *Categoriae decem* are noted in Luhtala (2002: 20–1). The passage cited here also suggests that Eriugena might have been familiar with the commentary on *Peri hermeneias* as copies of it started to circulate in Carolingian Europe in the ninth century (cf. n. 217 above).

*exterius in ore, et motum creaturae ab actu vel passione positum. Inde conficitur verbum esse quandam animi conceptionem significans substantiae actum vel passionem* (ed. Luhtala 2000b: 208).

[Speech is a mental concept for signifying things, whence we can naturally define separate parts of speech. For example, we can define the noun thus: a noun is a mental concept for signifying substances of things. Similarly, a verb is a mental concept for signifying actions or passions of the substance. Therefore, the verb is placed, as it were, in the middle between *uox* that sounds outwardly in the mouth and the motion of an agent set forth by an action or a passion. From this, the verb is shown to be a certain concept of the mind signifying action or passion of a substance].

Here, the notion of a mental language becomes more defined: it has not only discrete semantic units but also a basic syntactic structure. These ‘mental concepts’ representing substance and its actions are imagined as the conceptual prototypes of the spoken nouns and verbs. As in Aristotle’s account, they are placed between physical objects (or actions) and the phonological units that represent them in language. The idea of nouns and verbs as mental concepts corresponding to specific linguistic items is strikingly reminiscent of Boethius’ nouns and verbs *quae tacita mente tractentur* ‘which are handled silently in the mind’ (*PH* II 30.10). Since the purpose of these word-like mental concepts, according to Eriugena, is to signify things, we can understand them as Boethian *intellectus*, a combination of ‘thought’ and ‘meaning’. Contained within a person’s mind, they connect spoken words to their real-world referents.

This Aristotelian approach to meaning appears to have been rather fashionable in Eriugena’s time. One of its other adopters was, as one might expect, Sedulius Scottus. His commentary on Donatus’ *Ars minor* demonstrates that he and Eriugena share the same educational background. Sedulius likewise refers to the signification of different parts of speech as *mentis conceptus*. He starts with a general observation: *Pars orationis est uox articulata conceptum mentis ostendens* ‘A part of speech is an articulated *vox* which denotes a mental concept’ (Sed. *In min.* 6.12–13). Later Sedulius concludes: *Omnis enim uox articulata suam habet significationem. Quid est enim significare nisi mentis conceptum signo uocis exprimere* ‘Every articulated *vox* has its own signification. For what does it mean to signify but to express a mental concept by the sign of a *vox*’ (Sed. *In min.* 52.76–8). Sedulius’ approach to the topic is thus very close to Eriugena’s. For him signification likewise has its locus in the mind whence it can be realised through verbal signs.

These and the preceding accounts of meaning as a cognitive phenomenon follow the general Aristotelian blueprint. We may note that they also agree with Augustine's concept of *dicibile* which, as was established earlier, is *quod in verbo intellegitur et animo continetur* 'what is understood in the word and contained in the mind' with its emphasis on the intra-mental nature of meaning.

#### *Discursive Meaning and Meaning as Interpretation*

This exploration of Irish scholars' approaches to signification has so far focused on the meaning of singular words. The problems of the meaning of discourse, where semantics merges with hermeneutics, are the central theme of Chapter 6. However, a few remarks on this account can be made here, specifically in relation to the usage of *cíall* and *intlecht*.

The concept of meaning as presented in the St Gall glosses almost exclusively pertains to the meaning of words. In only one gloss does *intlecht* explicitly refer to the meaning of *oratio* 'speech' (Sg. 26a9=26a11o; cf. p. 174), while *cíall* is once applied to the meaning of a phrase from the main text rather than of a separate word (Sg. 209b26=209b23ss). However, outside of the St Gall corpus the usage of the two terms is not as rigid. In the Milan glosses, for example, in approximately half of the cases *cíall* and *intlecht* refer to the meaning of phrases, sentences, passages or even entire psalms. On some occasions, this meaning is presented as something objective, simply residing in or associated with the text. This is evident in such phrases as *intliucht indsailm* 'the sense of the psalm' (Ml. 24d22), *innaciolla mrechnigthi fil ánd* 'the varied senses which are in it' (Ml. 26c2), *ciáll fil is indligud so* 'the sense that is in this expression' (Ml. 76a13, 77b1).

However, more often there is an additional nuance to the application of the two terms which builds on the idea explored in the previous section, namely that meaning can be viewed as a product of mental activity. When it is understood to reside in individual minds (rather than to exist as an objective entity), 'meaning' can refer to authorial interpretation or authorial intention. This usage has been commented on at some length by Pierre-Yves Lambert (2016: 86–9) who observed that the vernacular formula *issí inso a chíall* 'this is the meaning' (and variations thereof) as a calque of Latin *est sensus* refers 'to the signification which has been

extracted of a psalm by a commentary'.<sup>221</sup> In this case, the commentary in question is that by Theodore of Mopsuestia – the text which the Milan glosses expound. References to Theodore's interpretation as *cíall* or *intlecht* sometimes immediately precede a lengthy vernacular rendering of the Latin main text (e.g. Ml. 44b10–11, 101c6–7, 112d2).

On other occasions, the 'meaning' can be attributed to other exegetes, such as Aquila of Sinope (fl. 130 AD) and Jerome:

*.i. baimmaircidiu frisinnintliucht ani asbeir aquil.*

[i.e. that which Aquila says would be more suitable to the sense (Ml. 27b9)].

*Mad la cirine immurgu issí ciall dumber side assindísiu.*

[If it is according to Jerome, however, this is the sense that he (Jerome) brings out of it (Ml. 74d13)].

Examples of this usage can also be found in the 'Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter'. For instance, *cíall* is used when a question is posed about the opening words of the first psalm, *Beatus vir* (Ps. 1:1), namely why this phrase is construed without the verb *est*. In response the author invokes interpretations offered by Gregory and Jerome. He uses the same formula for both: *Asbert dano Grigoir céill n-aili and, a bráithrea. Asbert dano Cirine céill n-aili and* 'Gregory, however, gives another sense, O brethren. Jerome also gives another sense' (OIT 405–7). While Jerome's opinion is not actually provided in the text, Gregory's position is cited from *Homiliae in Ezechielem* in a passage that has been discussed earlier in reference to the balance between the word in the mouth and the word in the mind (p. 103). Thus, the use of *cíall* pertains to extended pieces of exegesis by particular authors, in contrast to the interpretation of single words. For the latter purpose, the author uses the term *inne* in the sense of 'etymology', as was shown in Chapter 4 (pp. 157–8). *Inne* emphasises meaning as an extramental entity whereas *cíall*, understood as an authorial interpretation, reinforces the subjective connotations of meaning as a mental phenomenon.

In this view, discursive meaning is understood as individual interpretation of an existing text (although the individual in this case is necessarily an authoritative

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<sup>221</sup> This formula, with variations is attested 15 times in the Milan corpus: Ml. 50c1, 51b11, 51d6, 53a11, 62a17, 63a2, 65a3, 74c21, 88b11, 88d6, 90c24, 94b17, 114c7, 121c8, 128a6. On two occasions *cíall* is replaced with *inne*: Ml. 91a18, 110d18.

exegete). Another aspect of this author-centred idea of meaning focuses on the authorial intention in the creation of new texts. So, for example, we find Latin *intentio psalmis* glossed with *.i. sechis inchiall* ‘i.e. that is, the sense’ (Ml. 61a29). A complex piece of exegesis by Theodore attempts to disentangle levels of intended meaning in a passage from Ps. 15:10 – *quoniam non derelinques animam meam in inferno, non dabis sanctum tuum videre corruptionem* ‘for you will not abandon my soul in hell, or let your holy one see corruption’ (my translation) – which was later interpolated into the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:27). Theodore explains that when David said those words in the Psalm, it was done prophetically *in similitudine [...] et figura* ‘in likeness [...] and prefiguration’. However, when apostle Peter applied these same words to Christ, it was done *proprie [...] et secundum uerum intellectum* ‘appropriately [...] and according to the true understanding’ (CCSL 88A: 81.233–4). The glossator hastens to clarify:

*.i. ní hé apstal citarogab intestiminso. Aliter ní fou dauc int apstal foncheill fuandrogab in faith.*

[i.e. it was not the apostle who first uttered this text. *Aliter* it is not to that that the apostle applied it: according to the sense (*cíall*) in which the prophet uttered it (Ml. 38c3)].

The gloss gives the impression that its author struggled somewhat with the task of disentangling the levels of meaning proposed by Theodore. Indeed, it is an advanced exercise to reconcile the historical precedence of the original, literal meaning against the spiritual precedence of the prophetic meaning. Putting the problems of literal and figurative meaning aside for a moment, we may note that the true, intended meaning of David’s words in the psalm, their *intellectus* and *cíall*, is the meaning inspired in the psalmist’s mind by God in anticipation of the future events and is thus something that is conceived by the intellect, divine or human.

This idea receives further elaboration in the context of the debate over the authorship of the psalms. The *tituli* ascribe some of the psalms not to David but to other authors such as Asaph (Ps. 49, 72–82) and the sons of Korah (Ps. 41, 43–8, 83–4, 87–8). It is sometimes done with the formula *intellectus Asaph* (Ps. 73, 77), *intellectus Aethan* (Ps. 88) or *in intellectum filiis* (Ps. 41). The author of the ‘Old Irish Treatise’, however, does not concede that the psalms were written by anyone other than David while not denying that certain psalms may simultaneously belong to other people. This ambivalent argument is explained in a lengthy passage:

*Is ed cetharda arataisilbtar int sailm aliis personis, airec intliuchta ocus gnáthugud cétail, immaircidetu gníma ocus run ainmnigthe. Is glé is demin is Duíd a óinur rogab inna salmu, ocus is ed didiu dorími in senchas inna fetarlicce. Roorddnestar Duíd cethrar n-airechda fri céteil inna salm do thús inna class .i. Assaph, Eman, Idithún, Ethán, ocus alaili leú olchena. Aní nognáthaiged cách for cach claiss, dorochair i n-dilsetu dó, ocus a n-ainmnigud. Is aire ém doaisilbtar int sailm donaib persunnaib reméperthaib, cesu Duíd a óinur rusgab. Is menunn is fír díb línaib is la hAsab in salm ocus is Duíd rochachain .i. in Spirit Nóib dorinfid **im-menmain n-Asaib** in ciúl ocus **in n-intliucht** fil isint salm, ocus is Duíd dorat cuibdius foaib (OIT 158–75).*

[These are the four things on account of which the psalms are assigned *aliis personis*: **invention of meaning**, and practice of singing, congruity of action, and mystery of naming. It is clear it is certain that David alone received the psalms, and this is what the history of the Old Testament relates. David appointed four chief persons for the singing of the psalms, to lead the choirs, to wit, Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, Ethan, and others with them besides. What each one was used to do in each choir, fell to him specially, and [the psalms] were named after them. Therefore, truly, are the psalms assigned to the aforesaid persons, although David alone received them. It is clear that it is true both ways, that the psalm is by Asaph, and that David sang it, to wit, the Holy Spirit inspired **in Asaph's mind** the music and **the meaning** which are in the psalm, and it was David who gave them harmony (translation modified)].

There are many things to comment on in this passage. At the start, the phrase *airec intliuchta* ‘invention of meaning’ or ‘invention of the intellect’ draws our attention. It might have been coined by the author as a semantic loan to correspond to Latin *inventio* as one of the five parts of classical rhetoric, a method of developing arguments.<sup>222</sup> In our context, it may be conceived of as the act of composing the psalms around a certain central idea. This creative act is credited entirely to David: *Is glé is demin is Duíd a óinur rogab inna salmu* ‘It is clear it is certain that David alone received the psalms’. This would then suggest that it is David’s individual *intlecht* or intended meaning that the psalms embody. At the same time, however, Asaph also has a claim of intellectual ownership of the psalms since ‘the music and the meaning’ (*in ciúl ocus in n-intliucht*) were inspired in his mind (*im-menmain*) by the Holy Spirit. What appears to be meant here is that the Holy Spirit inspires a singer’s mind

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<sup>222</sup> Pádraig Ó Néill (2014: 123–4) suggested that the phrase *airec intliuchta* may be based on Latin *inventio intellectus* although he does not elaborate on this topic any further. This phrase does not appear to have been used as a technical term by Latin authors. At the same time, a seemingly synonymous phrase *airec menman áith* ‘acute invention of the mind’ appears elsewhere in the ‘Old Irish Treatise’ (OIT 252) as a ‘separated’ etymology of Latin *argumentum* suggesting that it refers to mental capacity to ‘invent’ an argument. One also may think of the Middle Irish tale *Airec menman Uraird maic Coise* ‘The Strategem of Urard mac Coise’ where the eponymous hero Urard mac Coise invents a fictitious narrative based on his own plights in order to manipulate royal judgement in his favour. For a comparison of this tale to the narrative category of *argumentum*, see Poppe (2008: 59–60).

to reproduce the music and the meaning of a psalm in their performance but the harmony of the two elements had been originally created by David. From this we may conclude that an idea, once conceived by one person, can be conveyed to the minds of others by means of speech, writing or, indeed, performance – a form of communication in its own right.

In this way, we are able to account for three out of the four criteria listed for determining the authorship of the psalms. *Airec intliuchta* refers to the full intellectual comprehension of the psalm, either at its composition by David or its performance by other singers. *Gnáthugud cétail* ‘practice of singing’ determines who of the choir-masters was assigned certain psalms whence those psalms received their names – this is their *run ainmnigthe* ‘mystery of naming’. But what of the fourth criterion, *immaircidetu gníma* ‘congruity of action’? The concept of *immaircidetu* ‘agreement, congruity, suitability’ appears to be central to the entire problem of psalm authorship. At a different place in the ‘Old Irish Treatise’ we find the following statement: *Is menunn didiu is Duíd a óinur ruscachain inna salmu, acht doaisilbtar alaili díb donaib persanaib reméperthaib ar immaircidetaid a céille ocus a n-intliuchta friu* ‘It is clear, however, that it is David alone who sang the psalms, but some of them are ascribed to the aforesaid persons, because of the agreement of their sense and meaning with them’ (OIT 134–8). This can be further compared to a gloss in the Milan corpus on the *titulus* of Psalm 48 *filiis Chore* ‘of the sons of Korah’: *.i. as immaircide fri intliucht macc core* ‘i.e. which is suitable to the sense of the sons of Core’ (Ml. 68b7). It would appear that what is meant by ‘agreement’ and ‘suitability’ is the idea of similarity of intent, that is, when both the author and the performer of a given psalm have fully comprehended its subject matter and can perform it in such a way as to produce the same effect in the audience.

From the examination of the above examples it becomes clear that the implication of individual intellectual capacity inherent in the terms *cíall* and *intlecht* allows for their semantic field to be further extended to cover the idea of meaning as (non-literal) interpretation and as the intended authorial idea of a text.

### **Folad and Meaning as an Objective Intelligible Entity**

An alternative to Aristotle’s approach to linguistic meaning as a product of the mind is the Platonic position where the meaning of a word is connected to the realm of objective and true Forms. In an Irish context, this view is expressed not by means of



the already familiar vocabulary of signification but through the concept of substance.

Approaching the problem of meaning from a different angle, the glossators of St Gall insist that word is the smallest linguistic unit capable of representing meaning. They drive this point home in a series of glosses reflecting on the difference between a word (*dictio/epert*) and a syllable:

*Differt autem dictio a syllaba, non solum quod syllaba pars est dictionis, sed etiam quod dictio dicendum, hoc est intellegendum, aliquid habet. Syllaba autem non omni modo aliquid significat per se: ergo monosyllabae dictiones possunt quodammodo esse et syllabae, non tamen sincere, quia numquam syllaba per se potest aliquid significare (GL II 53.14–17).*

[A word differs from a syllable not only in that a syllable is a part of the word, but also in that a word has something to be said, that is, to be understood. Syllables, however, do not always signify something by themselves: thus, monosyllabic words can, in a certain manner, also be syllables, but not truly, because a syllable can never signify something by itself].

[gl. *intelligendum*]: .i. *sluindith folad ind epert*.

[i.e. the word expresses substance (Sg. 25b10=25b24r)].

[gl. *quodammodo*]: .i. *ualailiu mud fri sillaba nád·tóirndet folad*.

[i.e. in another way (*quodammodo*) to syllables that signify no substance (Sg. 25b12=25b27t)].

[gl. *numquam*]: *ní·sluindi sillab folad trée feisin manip sin sillab coní bes rann insce*.

[no syllable by itself expresses a substance, unless it be a syllable which is able to be a part of speech (Sg. 25b14=25b28x)].

What stands out about this group of glosses is that they uniformly use the term *folad* ‘substance’ to refer to the semantic content of a word. Moreover, if one considers *folad* to be a synonym of other terms for ‘meaning’, it far exceeds them in attestations, with 59 glosses. It is therefore worth examining this concept in more detail and comparing it to *cíall* and *intlecht*.

The word *folad* as the Irish equivalent of *substantia*, like other such semantic loans, was bestowed this meaning with the proliferation of Latinate learning.<sup>223</sup> It originated, however, as a legal term variously referring to property and wealth, to

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<sup>223</sup> On *folad* as a loan-translation of *substantia*, see Binchy (1976: 171–2), Hofman (1996: vol. 2, 132), Boyle (2009: 220) and Lambert (2016: 95–6).

contractual obligations and relationships. Rudolf Thurneysen (1923: 374) gave an apt summary of its meanings:

*Folad* [...] ist schwer mit einem Wort zu übersetzen. Es bezeichnet das, was das Wesen eines Dinges ausmacht: bei Worten den Begriff, den sie bezeichnen; bei Verträgen die Gegenstände oder Leistungen, auf die sie sich beziehen; bei Lehnsherrn und Genossen das, was ihr Wesen ausmacht, ihr gegenseitiges richtiges Verhalten, ihr rechtes Gehaben.

[*Folad* can hardly be rendered by a single word. It denotes that which constitutes the essence of a thing; in the case of words, the idea they denote; in contracts, the objects or liabilities to which they refer; in the case of lords and clients the essence of their relationship, the correct discharge of their reciprocal obligations (trans. *eDIL*, s.v. *folad*)].

Indeed, such a description all but likens *folad* to a Platonic Form. However, in its Latinate meaning ‘substance’ it is more nuanced. Several remarks on the notion of substance have been made in Chapter 4, in the context of the theory of definitions (pp. 138–40). It was established that *definitio substantiae* is a type of definition that equates a word with a concept that it signifies by means of the verb *esse* ‘to be’. Importantly, it is also said to represent natural signification, as opposed to the arbitrary connection represented by *definitio soni*.

An important question that presents itself here is what is really meant by ‘substance’; whether it should be understood as a corporeal *Bedeutung* or an abstract *Sinn*. Initial clues for solving this problem are already built into Priscian’s text. Here we must briefly return to the complexities of ontological categories. According to Anneli Luhtala (2005: 85–6), Priscian’s statement that noun signifies substance is a clear subversion of Stoic materialism. Where his main source, Apollonius Dyscolus, claimed that nouns express bodies (*σώματα*), Priscian replaced the notion of the body with the notion of substance. Luhtala (2005: 86) elaborates: ‘This modification is hardly accidental since it at once dissociates the definition of the noun from its connection with Stoic materialism and lends it a much more familiar Peripatetic colouring’. Now Aristotle’s own concept of substance is itself riddled with complications, especially concerning the degree to which substances can be considered to be universals (Robinson 2018). What is crucial for the discussion at hand is that an ambiguity between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* has been introduced into the discussion of signification.

Priscian’s Irish glossators seized the opportunity to exploit this ambiguity. On five occasions *folad* is used to gloss Latin *significatio*, twice to gloss *intellectus* and twice

to gloss *vis* 'force' which in grammatical writings can often be interpreted as *vis significatiois*, the semantic 'force' of a word. Some examples:

(a) *quamvis vitium videar facere, intellectus tamen permanet* (GL II 19.3).

[although I seem to make an error, the meaning still remains].

[gl. *intellectus*]: *in·coissig a folad cétnae*.

[it signifies the same substance (Sg. 9a14=9a24mm)].

(b) *Non enim declinatio, sed vis et significatio uniuscuiusque partis est contemplanda* (GL II 55.20–1)

'Not the declension, but the force and the signification of every part [of speech] should be considered'.

[gl. *vis et significatio*]: *.i. a folad 7 in chiall*.

i.e. the substance and the sense (Sg. 27a8=27a13n)].

(c) *Sed quando comparantur participia, transeunt in nominum significationem* (GL II 84.21–2).

[But when participles are compared, they pass into the signification of nouns].

[gl. (*in*) *significationem*]: *isa foluth*.

[into the signification (Sg. 39b8=39b27l)].<sup>224</sup>

It appears, then, that *folad* in some cases is understood to be synonymous with 'meaning'. This is particularly evident in (b) where Latin *vis et significatio* are glossed with the vernacular pair *a folad 7 in chiall* thus emphasising their semantic closeness. By this association, *folad* approximates Frege's *Sinn* rather than *Bedeutung*.

Another prominent function of the term *folad* in the St Gall corpus is to act as the object for the verbs of signifying. Just as with nouns, the Old Irish lexicon is rich with verbs of meaning and signification. The most common ones used in the St Gall corpus are *sluindid* 'expresses, signifies; describes; names', *in-coissig* 'signifies, indicates' and *do-foirndea* 'expresses, signifies; marks out'. And, in fact, these verbs are most frequently construed with *folad* as their object. Out of twenty-one glosses where *sluindid* is attested, it is construed with *folad* as its object in ten. For *in-coissig*, the

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<sup>224</sup> Other instances of *folad* glossing *significatio* are Sg. 9b4=9b4k, 25b17=25b33gg, 33a32=33a42zz, 45b1=45b1b; glossing *intellectus* – Sg. 9b5; glossing *vis* – Sg. 30a5=30a8i.

number is five out of total twelve glosses; for *do-foirdnea* – four out of eleven. The simplest and most concise examples of this type of construction are:

*in-coissig a folad cétnae.*

[it signifies the same substance (Sg. 9a14=9a24mm)].

*.i. sluindith folad ind epert.*

[i.e. the word expresses substance (Sg. 25b10=25b24r)].

The verbs themselves appear to be interchangeable.<sup>225</sup> They sometimes occur within the same gloss: *do-foirnde in son 7 a folad in-choisig* ‘it determines the sound and the substance which it signifies’ (Sg. 9a12=9a23kk). We have encountered this gloss in Chapter 1 when discussing the juxtaposition of *son* and *folad* (p. 40). The gloss itself pertains to Priscian’s statement that aspiration does not affect the signification of words, e.g. the name *Erennius* can be pronounced with or without initial aspiration without any changes to its meaning (*GL* II 19.1–3). Now we can also add that the gloss presents a more elaborate model of signification. It implies that the written word *Erennius* denotes (*do-foirnde*) both the sound (*son*) of the word and its substance (*folad*). This is partially similar to the Aristotelian model where written marks serve as signs of spoken words which, in turn, are signs of affections of the soul. The gloss, however, seems to suggest that the written word can signify both sound and substance directly. What complicates matters is the relative clause *in-choisig* ‘which it signifies’. It can be interpreted in two different ways: (1) it reiterates that the written word is indeed that which signifies both sound and substance; (2) it tacitly changes the subject to *son* with *folad* as its only object, so that it creates a quasi-Aristotelian modification: a written word signifies substance through the mediation of the spoken sound. The first option appears to be the easier solution. However, the problem with it is that it creates unnecessary tautology. The

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<sup>225</sup> A direction for analysis which promises further insights is to examine the usage of these verbs across multiple sources and, additionally, to take into account their verbal nouns. Interestingly, in the St Gall corpus the three verbal nouns – *inchosc*, *slond* and *tórand* – appear in roughly the same number of glosses as their verbs (*in-coising* 12, *inchosc* 11; *sluindid* 21, *slond* 24; *do-foirdnea* 11, *tórand* 10). This is not the case for the Milan glosses where the distribution is not only uneven but also considerably poorer overall (*in-coisig* 13, *inchosc* 1; *sluindid* 3, *slond* 0; *do-foirdnea* 4, *tórand* 3). Apart from these numerical differences, the Milan corpus frequently touches upon non-linguistic signification whereby an object or an action, rather than a word, acts as a sign of something else (e.g. *MI*. 16c10, 48a11, 116d3). This usage is particularly prominent for *do-foirdnea* and *tórand* (e.g. *MI*. 2d2, 29b8, 55a9, 59b7, 65c16). However, this topic requires further investigation.

second option is more nuanced, although its point becomes somewhat muddled due to grammatical ambiguity.

The fact that *folad* is so closely associated with the act of signification suggests that within the simple model of a linguistic sign consisting of the signifier and the signified, *folad* is understood as the latter. In the same model, *son* represents the conceptual image of word-as-form (cf. Chapter 1). Substance and sound co-exist as closely linked but separate entities within the semantic space where their pairings create fully functional linguistic signs.

This precise usage, a grammatical and quasi-dialectical understanding of substance, is generally limited to the St Gall glosses. In the Milan and Würzburg corpora, where *folad* is likewise used to gloss *substantia*, the concept understandably takes on a more exegetical colouring. A number of attestations in the Milan glosses help expand our understanding of *folad* in a way that builds on, rather than contradicts, the usage of St Gall. In Milan, *folad* represents the natural character of things, both corporeal and incorporeal. So, for example, it can refer both to the material substance of the body and the 'subtle substance of the soul':

*.i. anas nesngabthi incorp .i. huasringaib corp fulach innafochodo dotet iarum dochum indfolaid tanaidi inna anmæ.*

[i.e. when the body is surpassed, i.e. after the endurance of suffering has moved beyond the body, then it comes to the subtle substance of the soul (Ml. 22d9)].

*.i. quando dixit deus cordis mei .i. sechis dia á huli folaid son etircorp 7 anim.*

[i.e. when God spoke to my heart i.e. that is, God of his entire substance, both body and soul (Ml. 92a13)].

Similarly, the substance of man is juxtaposed with the substance of divinity:

*.i. inunn folud techtmae ní duine didiu infoluid sin adnagursa acht is dia ol duaid.*

[i.e. the substance that we have is the same. It is not, then, a man of that substance that I fear, but it is God, says David (Ml. 74d4)].

*.i. nachdú hitadbadar beus ání as deus is dufolud nephchumscaigthiu asber.*

[i.e. every place in which the word *Deus* is shown moreover, it is about an unchangeable substance that it is said (Ml. 110d16)].

What unites these different types of substance with each other and with the views on substance espoused in the St Gall glosses is the fact that they exist naturally. An

illuminating example of this idea can be found in the Milan glosses when Theodore's Latin text offers an explanation of the phrase *angeli mali* 'destroying angels' (Ps. 77:49) which might have struck readers as confusing since angels were not usually perceived as evil beings (at least those who still bear that name):

*'Malos' autem angelos dicit illos illis, qui erant utique perdituri, quoniam nihil dici potest 'malum' naturaliter: interdum 'malum' uocamus quod non est de essentia, sed rerum prouenit de qualitate, ut est: 'in die mala' (CCSL 88A: 283.231–4).*

[He calls those angels among them 'evil' who were undoubtedly about to destroy, since nothing can be called 'evil' by nature: sometimes we call 'evil' that which is not of the essence, but proceeds from the quality of things, as in 'on an evil day'].

[gl. *naturaliter*]: .i. *innatuistin airis maith afolud hitorsata*.

[i.e. in their creation, for the substance in which they had been created is good (Ml. 99a8)].

[gl. *essentia*]: .i. *dindfolud ón indíxnigthetad*.

[i.e. that is, of the substance of the essence (Ml. 99a9)].

The Latin passage advocates for the inherent goodness of all creation, that is, as the first gloss explains, the natural goodness of all substance. Evil, on the other hand, exists only as a quality that may reside within an individual but cannot be predicated of an entire class. The main text uses the term *essentia* to refer to the fundamental nature of created beings which can often be synonymous with *substantia*. The glossator unmistakably recognised the concept in question and rendered it with vernacular *folad*. As for the term *díchnigthetu* 'being, essence', it is the verbal noun of *díchnigidir* 'exists, is extant' and should rather be understood as 'existence' or 'that which exists' as the bearer of *folad*.<sup>226</sup> Substance is thus imagined as the purest form of being, the nature imparted to everything at creation.

One final example that illuminates the notion of *folad* in the Milan glosses explicitly connects substance and nature. It occurs when the Latin text comments on the words of Ps. 40:2 *Beatus qui intellegit super egenum et pauperem* 'Blessed is he who considers the destitute and the poor' (my translation):

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<sup>226</sup> According to *eDIL*, the word *díchnigthetu* is a *hapax legomenon*. The proposed meaning 'being, essence' is given based only on this gloss. That the term should be understood as 'existence' rather than 'essence' is pointed out by the editors themselves (*eDIL*, s.v. *díchnigthetu*). It seems, therefore, that the meaning of the lemma should be changed accordingly.

*Id est, qui non praetereundo dissimulat, sed necessitates eius sensu compassionis introspicit.*

[That is, who does not pass by and neglect [him] but [who] inspects his needs through a sense of compassion (CCSL 88A: 188.6–8)].

[gl. *introspicit*]: .i. *etar décai* .i. *doécai indinmedonach* .i. *at gleinn assa aicniud fessin airis inunn folud techtas fris inbocht.*

[i.e. he introspects, i.e. he looks internally, i.e. he examines it from his own nature, for the substance that he has is the same as the poor man (Ml. 61a8)].

The Latin passage and the gloss are both masterful examples of phrasing: Julian of Eclanum, Theodore’s translator, uses the verb *introspicere* with the general meaning ‘to inspect, to examine’ to describe a person who finds compassion for others by looking inside themselves, literally *intro-* ‘inward’ + *specere* ‘to observe’. This is glossed with an *ad hoc* vernacular calque *etar-décai* ‘introspects’ and explained as *doécai indinmedonach* ‘looks internally’.<sup>227</sup> The glossator further explains that it is possible for us to empathise with others because people share the same substance – *airis inunn folud* ‘for the substance is the same’. This idea is in accord with what we have observed in the St Gall glosses, namely that the kind of substance signified by a common noun is the same for all individual objects in the class denoted by that noun, whence it follows that there is a certain degree of objectivity to the notion of substance.

Importantly, the gloss also suggests that this shared substance is something that can be discovered within one’s *aicned* ‘nature’. *Aicned* as a philosophical concept merits a dedicated discussion which is outside the scope of this study. However, it may be noted that *aicned* is attested side-by-side with *folad* in the Middle Irish sermon *Scéla na esérgi* ‘The Tidings of Resurrection’. This text will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7 (pp. 250–1, 266–70), but for now we may refer to Elizabeth Boyle’s observations on the philosophical content of the two terms. She pointed out that *aicned*, understood as Platonically incorporeal ‘essence’ or ‘nature’, complements and contrasts the use of *folad* which ‘encompasses both the physicality of the resurrected body, but also the metaphysical substance of that body: the physical man and the concept “man”’ (Boyle 2009: 220). Thus, despite the differences in date,

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<sup>227</sup> The verb *etar-décai* ‘introspects’ appears to be a *hapax legomenon* and is compounded of the prefix *eter-* ‘between’ and the verb *do-écai* ‘looks’ (*eDIL*, s.v.). Perhaps, some confusion occurred between Latin prefixes *intro-* ‘inward’ and *inter-* ‘between’ in the process of rendering Latin *introspicere* into Irish.

*Scéla na esérgi* and the Milan glosses seem to agree on the idea that *folad* is something that is both particular and general, possessed by an individual and shared by all.

Having thus explored the notion of ‘substance’ in more depth, we may once again return to the theory of definitions to briefly revisit our conclusions regarding *definitio substantiae*. Its stated function is to represent *natura sensus uel uocis uel sensus et uocis* ‘the nature of meaning or *vox*, or of meaning and *vox*’ (DO 66.46). This is in accord with the ‘natural’ connotations of *folad* that emerge from the glosses. However, the statement is somewhat complicated by the addition of *vox* as another object of *definitio substantiae*. Upon analysis, it provides three options as to what definition of substance represents: (1) *natura sensus*; (2) *natura uocis*; (3) *natura sensus et uocis*. Option (1) is unproblematic: the idea that the definition of substance reflects ‘the nature of meaning’ (*natura sensus*), upholds, perhaps unwittingly, the Aristotelian thesis that mental representations correspond naturally to their referents. Option (3) can also fit into this view, with some reservations, if *vox* is considered to have a natural substance by virtue of its association with a specific (natural) meaning. Options (2) and (3), however, are more in line with naturalist approaches to language where word-form is viewed as an accurate, isomorphic representation of its reference. This once again demonstrates the fluidity of opinions in the age-old dispute between nature and convention in philosophy of language.

The foregoing observations on the concept of *folad* in vernacular sources have shown that it became a remarkably close analogue to the notion of linguistic meaning. There are, however, two important differences between concepts such as *cíall/intlecht* and *folad*. First, it is clear that *folad* does not have the same cognitive connotations as the other two terms. Its usage does not approximate ‘thought’ or ‘understanding’ and therefore does not invoke the sense of interiority and individual perception. Rather, *folad* as a natural state of being is an entity that is external to the mind, more akin to Platonic Forms or to Fregean *Sinn*. Second, it has been shown that both *cíall* and *intlecht* often refer to the meaning of utterances and other extended pieces of discourse. *Folad*, on the other hand, when it is used in the sense ‘meaning’ refers only to the meaning of words. This is due to the fact that persons and objects as singular entities possess substance individually, but in connected speech, those substances, denoted by words, become only some of the participants



within a complex web of semantic and syntactic relationships where substances, qualities and actions are interwoven to create discursive meaning.

### ***Meaning and Translation: Navigating Semantics across Languages***

In this final section I propose to examine the concept of meaning against the problems interlingual translation using two case-studies based on the evidence of the Milan and Würzburg glosses. Given the fact that the very existence of these gloss-corpora is predicated on the multilingualism of early medieval learned discourse, they can offer us insights into the way in which semantics was understood to function in such a context. The first case-study focuses on the Milan glosses and the glossator's conflicting thoughts on the problem of polysemy in translating Hebrew words. It neatly brings together various aspects of the concept of word-meaning discussed thus far. The second case-study once again transitions from word-meaning toward discursive meaning to examine a pair of glosses from the Würzburg collection that reflect on the practice of *interpretatio* as a syncretic operation which merges translation and interpretation. This analysis will lead us seamlessly into Chapter 6 which will focus on hermeneutics.

#### *The Milan Glosses on Polysemy*

The Milan glosses are a particularly curious source for the study of semantics in a multilingual context because of the complexity of the system that they and their main text present. To reiterate, the Milan glosses gloss not the Psalter directly but a Latin version of the commentary on it by Theodore of Mopsuestia which is itself partly a translation from Greek by Julian of Eclanum and partly an epitome of it. This multi-level textual system thus combines the discursive techniques of translation, interpretation and paraphrase, each of which requires deep engagement with the semantic content of language.

Here I will limit myself to just one illuminating example of the glossators' approach to their highly complex source material. A remarkable and lengthy gloss in the Milan corpus reflects on the problems of translating polysemous words and agonises over the impossibility of preserving all meanings of the original which leads to a loss of semantic force in translation.

First, it is necessary to establish the context for this gloss. The source of contention are two verses from Psalm 15: *Sanctis qui sunt in terra eius mirificavit: omnes*

*voluntates meas in eis. Multiplicatae sunt infirmitates eorum* ‘The holy ones who are in his land, he exalted all my desires for them. Their sorrows have been multiplied’ (Ps. 15:3–4; my translation). The main difficulty of the passage is to determine who is meant by *sancti* ‘the holy ones’: the Israelites or the Gentiles. In his commentary, Theodore of Mopsuestia proclaims that the Septuagint is wrong in interpreting *sancti* as the Israelites. Instead he appeals to the authority of the Syriac and the Hebrew Bible:

*Apud Syros autem siue Ebreos non ita habetur, apud quos hoc modo positum est: superbis ac magnis, potentibus ac robustis, id est, gentibus quae in circuitu nostro sunt et nobis molestae esse non desinunt – admirabilis ostensus es ita (CCSL 88A: 76.39–43).*

[It is not like this, however, with the Syrians or the Hebrews, with whom it is put as follows: unto the haughty and the mighty, unto the powerful and the strong, i.e. unto the nations that surround us and do not cease to cause us trouble, You, the glorious one, has appeared (trans. Lindeman 1987: 179; lightly modified)].

In addition to offering this modified reading, allegedly based on the Syriac and Hebrew text, Theodore also suggests that the Hebrew word for ‘holy’ had a rather broad semantic field in general: *Omne ‘sanctum’ singulare etiam et praecipuum uocauerunt, eo quod in commonionem uel in exsaequationem reliquorum per meriti eminentiam non ueniret* ‘They called every unique and preeminent [thing] ‘holy’, because it did not fit into the company or level of other [things] due to the excellence of its value’ (CCSL 88A: 77.95–7; my translation). Thus Theodore sows the seeds of doubt regarding both the translation and interpretation of the verses in question.

The anonymous Irish scholar who took it upon himself to make sense of these passages utilised all information provided by Theodore and came to the conclusion that the Hebrew word for ‘holy’ must have multiple meanings which are indelibly lost in Latin *sanctus*. This (perceived) semantic ambiguity caused the glossator great anguish, evident from the sheer length of the gloss dedicated to the problem:

*Hic est sensus uerborum .i. huare is sanctis conoincheill and .i. conoibi namma doberamni do thintud in suin ebraidi sluindes ilsésu 7 ilintliuchtú laebreu 7 dogní doidgni 7 chumdubairt insin .i. huare ataat ilchialla isint sun ebraidiu 7 nad taibrem ni acht oincheill asindi as int sancti 7 huare nach du noibi téit laebreu hisunt in son diandid tintud linnai a sanctis sed dicitur superbis 7 magnis 7 potentibus 7 robustis. Aliter. issí inchumtubart 7 indoidgne nad fetammar ni im du iudaib fagentib berthair a sanctis fil sunt huare as necen odib oinson tintá in son nebraide cosnaib ilchiallaib techtas .i. sanctos ł. sanctis*

*cosíndóinchel nammá asreil 7 as adblom as .i. abríth doiudaib olsodin nad choir hi sunt iarsint síans ebraidiu acht is dogentib is coir a breth.*

[*Hic est sensus uerborum* i.e. because it is *sanctis* with one sense in it, i.e. with holiness only, that we apply to translate the Hebrew word that signifies many senses and many meanings with the Hebrews; that causes difficulty and doubt, i.e. because there are many senses in the Hebrew word, and we bring only one sense from it, from the *sanctis*, and because it is not to holiness that the word for which *sanctis* is the rendering with us applies with the Hebrews here, but it is applied to *superbis, magnis, potentibus* and *robustis*. *Aliter*, this is the doubt and the difficulty, that we do not know whether it is to Jews or to Gentiles that *sanctis* is referred here, because it is necessary that it be one word which should translate the Hebrew word with the many meanings that it has, i.e. *sanctis* with the one sense only, which is clear and ready from it, i.e., its reference to Jews: which, however, is not right here according to the Hebrew meaning, but it is to Gentiles that it is right to refer it (Ml. 37a10)].

First, it should be pointed out that this gloss itself is somewhat of a terminological tour-de-force: it utilises a remarkable variety of vernacular linguistic vocabulary, including *son* as a phonological word as well as three different terms for meaning *cíall, intliucht, síans* (a discussion of the latter is upcoming in Chapter 6 (pp. 211–13)). While in this case all three appear to be synonymous, it is nevertheless an extraordinary display of the richness of vernacular technical terminology.

As for the content of the gloss, we get the impression that the glossator finds Theodore’s interpretation somewhat unnatural: he notes that there is only one ‘clear and ready’ sense of the Latin word *sancti* and that it should rightfully refer to the Jews. At the same time, he is determined to justify Theodore’s identification of the *sancti* as the enemies of Israel. To do so, he assumes that the words *superbi, magni, potentes* and *robusti* in the alternative text of the verse proposed by Theodore are, in fact, the various meanings of the Hebrew word ‘holy’. The glossator may have been led to this conclusion by Theodore’s later statement that the Hebrew word could signify ‘any unique and preeminent thing’. Still, he does not seem to be entirely satisfied with this solution as the apparent polysemy causes him *doidgni 7 chumdubairt* ‘difficulty and doubt’.

The glossator’s thought process in this situation is entirely grounded in his educational background. One factor that might have encouraged him to propose such unusual polysemy for the Hebrew word is the fact that the Hebrew language ‘had a reputation for being highly ambiguous’, an idea perpetuated, among others, by Jerome – considered to be the greatest authority on all matters concerning Hebrew (Graves 2007: 37–8). Therefore, one was conditioned to expect more rather

than less when dealing with Hebrew glossemata. At the same time, this hyper-awareness of semantic ambiguity might be a result of the glossator's grammatical training, since one of the main tasks of a grammarian was to disambiguate word-senses, often with the help of etymology.<sup>228</sup>

At this point we should finally turn our attention to the elusive Hebrew word itself and establish whether the glossator was correct in assigning it multiple meanings. After examining both Theodore's remarks concerning the Hebrew text of the Psalm and the glossator's interpretation of them, Frederik Lindeman (1987) concluded that the entire argument is 'of an entirely chimerical nature' and has no real grounding in the Masoretic text. He also noted that the Hebrew word for 'holy' is *qāḏōš* and that it 'means "holy, sacred" only, from the earliest time' (Lindeman 1987: 180). But this is not to say that we should dismiss the entire gloss as irrelevant. Its true value lies in the insights that it provides about the interpretative strategies used by the glossators.

In light of Lindeman's conclusion, it is interesting to re-examine the glossator's obvious hesitation in accepting his own claim for polysemy. It may have resulted from being remotely familiar with the Hebrew word in question. This is not entirely unlikely, given Irish reverence for the *tres linguae sacrae* and the salience of the word 'holy' in a religious context.<sup>229</sup> In fact, the glossary *De origine scoticae linguae* etymologises the Irish word *cáid* 'holy, noble, pure' as a calque from Hebrew: *Cath ebraice cades .i. sanctus* 'Cath (*cáid*) in Hebrew *cados* i.e. "holy"' (DOSL 193). Although the etymology on offer does not hold up under modern scrutiny, the Hebrew glosseme *qāḏōš* is indeed recognisable. Note that the entry does not record any semantic ambiguity for this word. There is a possibility that the glossator was aware of this unambiguous translation, if not through the glossaries then through Jerome's *Liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum* which was the main source of the basic knowledge of Hebrew in early medieval Europe and where Jerome renders *cados* as *sanctus* on several occasions.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> See Irvine (1994: 2–8 *et passim*). See also the discussion of multiplying etymologies of a single word in Chapter 4 (pp. 150–4).

<sup>229</sup> On the rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew in early medieval Ireland, see Howlett (1997), Moran (2010). On the *tres linguae sacrae*, see n. 52 above.

<sup>230</sup> For examples, see Paul de Lagarde's edition (Lagarde 1870: 4.4, 12.18, 17.3, 48.12, 57.6).

What can we learn from this case-study? Despite the fact that the difficulty that so bothered the glossator was only a perceived one, the overall problem diagnosed by him is quite real and remains a common source of anxiety for many translators today. Modern scholars refer to it as interlingual asymmetry: when the conceptual domain that encompasses word-meaning in the source language does not readily map onto any existing conceptual domains in the target language. This would normally be solved by identifying one sense that is most relevant to the given context and providing a suitable equivalent in the target language. However, in our case the glossator had no control over the Latin text of the Psalter. Instead, encouraged by Theodore's commentary, he decided that readers should be alerted to the (perceived) semantic caveat associated with the word *sanctus*. This had to be done by external means, that is, through an *interpretatio* in the form of a gloss.

As for the theoretical implications of this example, it highlights the imperfections of semantic links between languages and, in doing so, reinforces Aristotle's conventionalist position regarding the connection between spoken words and thoughts that they represent. While languages may share the same semantic content or the same 'thoughts', the way in which they are expressed outwardly does not conform to a common logic. Thus, a specific cluster of meanings may be attached to one specific word-form in one language but be scattered across any number of words in another. This further emphasises the idea that meaning as an abstract thought-like concept is, in its purest state, detached from the word-as-form. Although, of course, we should keep in mind that this is just one of the ways to approach the problems of signification, one of the fragments within the panorama of Irish theories of meaning.

#### *The Würzburg Glosses on interpretatio*

Changing the scale of our analysis from micro to macro, we now turn to more fundamental questions of creating meaning through interpretation, broadly understood. One of the pillars of Latin textual culture, *interpretatio* was a remarkably versatile concept. Like its Greek equivalent *ἐρμηνεία*, it originally used to mean 'signification' but in practice, it 'would most commonly designate such intermediary functions as explication and translation' (Copeland 1991: 88; cf. Kelly 1997: 47–8). This blurred line between what today we distinguish as translation and commentary becomes particularly relevant when it comes to bilingual writings such

as early medieval glosses which employ a combination of Latin and vernacular to explicate a Latin text.

Apart from being an example of such a multifaceted *interpretatio*, the Würzburg glosses provide us with an eighth-century Irish glossator's own reflection on this practice. It occurs in the context of apostle Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor. 12. Two of those gifts are speaking in tongues and interpreting them. Commenting on the latter, the Würzburg glossator draws a parallel between exegetical work and translation. Both activities are described as 'bringing hidden meanings out of words':

(a) ...*alii genera linguarum, alii interpretatio sermonum.*

[to another [are given] various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues (1 Cor 12:10)].

[gl. (*interpretatio*) *sermonum*] .i. *tintuúth bélri innaláil ut hieronimus et LXX. †. rúna dothabairt á ónsonaib et precept essib iarum.*

[i.e. translation of (one) language into another like Jerome and the Septuagint, or to bring hidden meanings out of single words, and then to preach from them (Wb. 12a10)].

(b) *Numquid omnes linguis loquuntur; numquid omnes interpretantur.*

[Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? (1 Cor 12:30)].

[gl. *interpretantur*] .i. *nitatsoír huili oc tintuúth abélru innalail †. ocsaigid forsunu †. octabairt ruún essib.*

[i.e. all are not skilled in translating from one language into another, or in disputing as to words, or in bringing hidden meanings out of them (Wb. 12b23)].

Both glosses comment on the concept of *interpretatio* and offer two possible ways to understand it: as interlingual translation and as exposition of obscure meanings. In doing so, they also connote much additional information which places them firmly into the context of early medieval textual practices.

Let us start with the first stated meaning of *interpretatio*: translation from one language into another.<sup>231</sup> The vernacular term used here is *tintúd*, the verbal noun

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<sup>231</sup> It should be noted that *interpretatio* was the most common Latin term for designating interlingual translation. Another term, *translatio*, could sometimes be used for this purpose but it has a number of other, more salient applications. Apart from its political and ideological meaning (*translatio imperii et studii*), *translatio* as 'transference' was often used by grammarians to describe the functioning of metaphor and other literary tropes where the meaning is 'translated' from the source to the target concept (Curtius 1953: 28–30; Irvine 1994: 105–6).

of the verb *do-intaí* with the basic meaning ‘turns back, returns’ but which in Old Irish glosses is frequently used to mean ‘translates, renders’ (*eDIL*, s.v.). Interestingly, the term *tintúd* in itself does not seem to have the same exegetical implications as Latin *interpretatio*. In the Milan corpus, it is used frequently in reference to interlingual translation, specifically in the formulae *debe tintuda* ‘a difference of rendering’ and *saintintud* ‘different rendering’ which help to point out discrepancies between the Psalter text used in the Latin translation of Theodore’s commentary on the one hand and the Vulgate and the Septuagint on the other.<sup>232</sup>

However, there is an important detail that brings the term *tintúd* closer to the semantic complexity of *interpretatio*. Gloss (a) above references the authority of the divinely inspired Septuagint as well as Jerome as the Latin translator *par excellence*, giving us a glimpse of a possible translation theory implicit in the term *tintúd*. Indeed, Jerome is the key authority for medieval translation practices. He delineated his approach to translation on several occasions, perhaps most significantly in *Epistula* LVII to Pammachius, also known as *De optimo genere interpretandi* ‘On the best method of translation’. In it, he coins the term *hebraica veritas* ‘the Hebrew truth’ to refer to the Hebrew Bible (Jerome, *Epist.* LVII.7, 9; *CSEL* 54: 513.22–3; 520.13–15). Centring ‘truth’ as the object of rendering into a different language encapsulates Jerome’s translation programme which can be described as ‘a theory of direct conservation of textual meaning without the impediment of linguistic multiplicity’ (Copeland 1991: 51). We have direct evidence provided by the Milan glosses that the notion of *hebraica veritas* was familiar to Irish scholars. In his preface to the Psalter addressed to Sophronius, Jerome fears that his friend might question his strengths (*vires*) as a translator. The glossator clarifies: [gl. *vires*] *.i. denum tintuda inna firinne file isindebrae isinlaitin* ‘i.e. to make a translation of the truth that is in the Hebrew into Latin’ (Ml. 2d11). Clearly then, Irish scholars took note of this important tenet of Jerome’s translation theory, namely that the object of translation is not the form, but the meaning or ‘the truth’ – *fírinne*.

A few words can be said about what it means to translate ‘the truth’. In matters of translation, the Latin West operated with two main methodological approaches:

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<sup>232</sup> The version used by Julian of Eclanum was a Roman Psalter with some Gallican readings while the epitome displays a much stronger influence of the Gallican Psalter with some Mozarabic additions. See Ó Néill (2002: 69). The formula *debe tintuda* occurs 66 times in the Milan corpus while *saintintud* is attested 5 times.

word-for-word (*ad verbum*) and sense-for-sense (*ad sensum*) translation. The Romans, most notably Cicero and Horace, dismissed the *ad verbum* approach as slavish and uncreative, inferior to the inventive, rhetorically embellished appropriation of the source text achievable through the *ad sensum* method. For late antique and medieval authors, on the other hand, the search for simple formal equivalence became a prerequisite, especially in dealing with sacred texts.<sup>233</sup> At the same time, the understanding of the two approaches changed dramatically. William Adler (1994: 339) pointed to Jerome as the one who transformed the understanding of *sensus* and *verbum*: “Sense” now connotes the simple unadorned meaning to which the Christian man of letters should aspire, in contrast to the superficial beguilement of “words”. Rita Copeland (1991: 43) similarly noted that ‘patristic translation theory is concerned mainly with recuperating a truthful meaning beyond the accidents of human linguistic multiplicity’. The idea of translating ‘the truth’ thus builds on the premise of the universal, immanent character of linguistic meaning, unfettered by the concerns of word-choice, idiom or style.

The second component of *interpretatio* pinpointed in both glosses cited above is perhaps closer to what we today understand by the English word ‘interpretation’. The choice of vocabulary here is likewise significant. Variations on the same phrase are used in both (a) and (b): ‘bringing hidden meanings out of words’. It is construed with the verbal noun *tabairt* ‘taking, bringing’, and uses the term *rún* ‘mystery’ to refer to the object of *interpretatio* which adds important theoretical nuance to the expression. Referring to the object of interpretation as *rún* calls to mind those Irish sources which use the term to designate allegorical or spiritual exegesis, that is, the practice of operating with signification of a higher order than is reflected in ordinary language. Most notable examples of this are, again, found in the Milan glosses. It is used, for example, to juxtapose historical and Christological reading of Psalm 21: *du stoir* ‘according to the literal sense’ and *du ruín* ‘according to the mystic sense’ respectively (Ml. 44b4, 44b6).<sup>234</sup> The use of *rún* in the two glosses from Würzburg helps emphasise this additional aspect of *interpretatio* as a semantic operation that

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<sup>233</sup> For a discussion of the dominance of the word-for-word method in the middle ages, concluding with a somewhat negative evaluation, see Schwartz (1944). A more recent study by Kelly (1997) adds nuance to the topic.

<sup>234</sup> Other examples in the Milan glosses are Ml. 2d2, 38c7, 45a2, 45a3. For attestations of *stair* in the sense ‘literal meaning’, see *eDIL*, s.v. *stair* (b). The term *rún* in the sense of ‘mystical interpretation’, together with its apparent synonym *síans* also occurs in the notes for a Pentecostal homily in the Book of Armagh (TCD MS 52, f. 171vb) which is discussed in Chapter 6 which offers a dedicated overview of Irish approaches to non-literal exegesis.



functions on a conceptual level, involving advanced hermeneutical techniques, rather than on the level of literal equivalencies.

A gloss in the Milan corpus further reinforces the connection between *rún* and *interpretatio*. It comments on a remark in Jerome's preface to the Psalter concerning the number of books in Hebrew Scriptures – twenty-two – and that this number contains a mystery (*misterium*). Indeed, we already know that it is a reference to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet (cf. p. 63). This is confirmed in a gloss:

[gl. *misterium*] .i. amal it dalebur fichet it di litir fichet dano 7 indi litir fichet hisin. indrún 7 indetercert fil hisuidib ní bed immaircide frisannuadnise.

[i.e. as there are twenty-two books, there are twenty-two letters as well, and those twenty-two letters: the mystery and the interpretation which are in them (are) something that would have been suited to the New Testament (Ml. 2d2)].

To emphasise the allegorical nature of the association between the number of books and the number of letters the term *rún* is used but it appears here together with another vernacular term – *etercert* 'interpretation' or 'investigation'. It brings attention to the argumentative aspect of exegetical work, that is, constructing a reasoned case for the author's chosen interpretation.<sup>235</sup> This is perhaps the method that is implied in the phrase 'to bring hidden meanings out of words': if *rún* is the mystical meaning itself then *etercert* is the act of extracting it from its linguistic form and removing the obscurity by means of commentary.

From the foregoing it is evident that the Irish glossator of Würzburg understood the complexity of the concept of *interpretatio* and demonstrated it by simultaneously invoking the practice of interlingual translation (with the added undercurrent of Hieronymian translation theory) and the exegetical method with its propensity for multi-level signification. Indeed, in many ways, this framework also helps to account for the phenomenon of vernacular glossing itself. By adding explanatory remarks to an authoritative Latin text, a glossator performs the work of a translator who aims to capture the core meaning of the text in an idiom appropriate to the scholar's native language and expand on it by means of careful interpretation.

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<sup>235</sup> *Etercert* is also used in the sense of 'discussing, dissertating' in Wb. 27a10, 29c10.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have looked at Irish approaches to meaning as an incorporeal intelligible entity detached from the formal aspects of language. Two main tendencies have been observed: one imagines meaning in terms of human mental activity and another rather views it as an objective, extramental entity. These two positions can be usefully compared to Aristotelian and Platonic views of meaning respectfully, or, using a more modern framework, to Frege's concepts of *Vorstellung* 'idea' and *Sinn* 'sense'.

The first approach in Irish sources revolves around two terms – *cíall* and *intlecht* – both of which operate within two semantic domains, those of meaning and mind. Due to this, the type of signification that they encode tends to emphasise the role of individual cognition in semantic operations. The St Gall glosses apply this view to the meaning of single words, and it also has wider implications for the understanding of discursive meaning, as is evident in the Milan glosses and the 'Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter'. When viewed as a product of mental activity, the meaning of an utterance or a text becomes equivalent with authorial intention in a newly created piece of discourse or individual authoritative interpretation of an existing one.

The second approach to signification as an incorporeal entity leans more into the quality of objectivity and expounds a type of meaning that exists independently of the human mind. This view is mostly associated with the term *folad* 'substance' which in vernacular intellectual tradition came to represent a thoroughly philosophical concept, the essential being of an object, a naturally given and unchangeable characteristic that defines a class. So, all humans share the same substance, and thus substance is something that every human possesses individually but that can be abstracted as one common ideal substance. When understood as meaning, substance is similarly abstracted, both from the word-as-form and from the human mind, but is intelligible to the mind through the form.

It is thus clear that meaning was viewed as a complex and multi-layered concept even within the confines of a single language. The matters become further complicated when the topic of signification is considered within the practice of translation. The final part of the chapter addressed two specific aspects of this wider

problem, namely the difficulties of conveying polysemy in different languages and the convergence of explanation and translation within the practice of *interpretatio*.

The case-study of a gloss from the Milan corpus reflecting on the lack of lexical correspondences between languages provides additional support to the incorporeal view of meaning. When a word in one language possesses multiple meanings, they form a network and inform each other. Taken individually, these meanings may well exist in all other languages but the lexicon of each language imposes limitations on how they are attached to specific word-forms and what semantic networks they form. Thus, translating a polysemous word into a language where connections between word-forms and concepts are different risks the loss of important semantic shades. While meanings as abstractions may be shared by all people, their universality becomes undermined on the level of linguistic expression.

Finally, we have considered the practice of *interpretatio* where many of the previously observed aspects of signification as a concept converge. *Interpretatio* is a search for meaning; its aim is to extract, contemplate and present meaning to an audience, be it speakers of a different language (*interpretatio* as interlingual translation) or people less experienced in making inferences about authorial intention, i.e. in critical reading.

With these conclusions, we arrive at the final part of this study which ascends further: first into the realm of hermeneutics where the relationship between meaning and form becomes almost endlessly modified by layers of interpretation, and ultimately into the realm of thought where form is shed entirely and meaning becomes a language unto itself.

## **Part III**

Interpretation, Language, Mind:  
Understanding Cognition through Language

## Chapter 6: Irish Theories of Exegesis

### *Medieval Hermeneutics and the Death of the Author*

The two chapters comprising Part II of this study delved into Irish views on the concept of meaning, for the most part, in relation to what can be called primary signification, that is, what words signify primarily and literally, the connection between words and things (cf. Evans 1984: 53–4). We did briefly touch upon signification of extended pieces of discourse and the concept of interpretation, which is closely associated with it, and which shifts focus from primary, linguistically pre-determined meaning towards individual reading of a text that is one step removed from the letter.

This chapter takes a closer look at the idea of non-literal meaning. Indeed, an investigation of early medieval theories of meaning would be incomplete without an in-depth discussion of signification in the context of hermeneutics – a thriving branch of medieval intellectual tradition whose goal was to mine for meanings on multiple levels, from literal signification to eschatological prophecy. It has often been observed that medieval textual culture was built on the assumption that words alone are not all that there is to a text, that meanings are latent between the lines (cf. Ohly 1958; trans. 2005; Smalley 1964). As Karl Morrison (1990: 247) put it, ‘St Paul’s axiom, “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Cor. 3:6) inspired luxuriant methods of exegesis intended to disclose what was unsaid in what was uttered’. Almost countless meanings could be procured from the rift that opened between what was objectively given and what was subjectively construed from a text. In this vein, David Olson compared the reading practices of the early middle ages to postmodernist theories of discourse whereby for Carolingian intellectuals

the actual words or forms are merely the tip of the conceptual iceberg, the real meanings lying far beneath the surface and detectable only by internalization and meditation. In fact, reading in Charlemagne’s day is somewhat similar to reading the post-modern, or reader-response way – what a text means is what a reader takes it to mean (Olson 1994: 145).

Indeed, Roland Barthes’ classic essay *La mort de l’auteur* ‘The Death of the Author’ postulates a type of literary criticism that bears strong resemblance to the approach to meaning that we find in our sources, which is helped by the fact that, as Barthes himself observed, the Author never existed in the first place prior to the late middle ages (Barthes 1977: 142–3). He proceeds to give a description of writing that would

fit a great number of early medieval texts which conceal the identity of the writer behind borrowings from numerous other authorities:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning [...] but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture (Barthes 1977: 146).

Although Barthes, in a somewhat simplistic way, presents 'theological meaning' as something dogmatic, rigid and singular, it is exactly what meaning in medieval exegesis is not. Meaning, as Augustine saw it, is what a reader understands it to be: *Quid, inquam, mihi obest, si aliud ego sensero, quam sensit alius eum sensisse, qui scripsit?* 'What difficulty is it for me, I say, if I understand the text in a way different from someone else, who understands the scriptural author in another sense?' (Aug. Conf. XII.xviii.27; CCSL 27: 229.9–10; trans. Chadwick 1991: 259). In an earlier work, 'Mythologies', Barthes (1973: 132) described such an unfixed, rippling semantic space as 'a halo of virtualities where [...] possible meanings are floating'. This is an image that we will recognise at many stages of this chapter's argument.

The argument itself is presented in three sections. The first section addresses the foundational concept of medieval exegesis, namely allegory as a literary trope. Its role in the history of hermeneutics is traced through Neoplatonism to patristic writings. The second section deals directly with Irish exegetical models. It examines two different approaches to fourfold signification: one that appears to be unique to Irish Psalter exegesis that includes two historical senses and one that is considered a standard fourfold schema comprising historical, allegorical, moral and anagogical meaning. This is followed by a discussion of a simplified twofold exegetical schema which distinguishes between historical interpretations and a syncretic spiritual sense. The final section extends the study of the twofold model by examining its use in vernacular narrative literature as a type of secular hermeneutics used by poets.

### ***Grammatica, Neoplatonism and the Emergence of Non-Literal Signification***

Christian textual culture has its foundation in the systematic study of language under the auspices of *grammatica*, a discipline which not only covered the formal analysis of normative language but also, on a more advanced level, concerned itself with problems of interpretation. This latter branch of the curriculum was known as *enarratio* in Latin and, of course, *exegetis* (ἐξήγησις) in Greek. An integral part of *enarratio* was the grammatical theory of tropes which grew out of the semiotic

works of Aristotle and the Stoics and made its way into the middle ages via late antique grammars and Isidore's *Etymologiae* (Irvine 1994: 225–32). Broadly speaking, any linguistic utterance can be classified as either *verba propria* 'literal expression' or as *verba translata* 'transferred expression'. These *verba translata*, or tropes, differ from *verba propria* in that their use requires the presence of two semantic levels: the primary relation between words and their referents and secondary signification that points beyond it (Irvine 1994: 247–9). To the category of *verba translata* belong such tropes as enigma, irony, sarcasm and, most importantly, metaphor and allegory.<sup>236</sup> Allegory and interpretation as semiotic practices stand in inverse correlation to each other: what allegory encodes interpretation decodes, but both function by creating a secondary sense through a primary one (Irvine 1994: 245).

Irish scholars of the early middle ages showed an enormous interest in the study of language, and their grammatical training influenced their reading of biblical and non-biblical texts alike. Sedulius Scottus clearly stated the primacy of allegory as a hermeneutic tool in his commentary on Donatus' *Ars maior*:

*Tamen ad allegoriam pro sui excellentia haec descriptio, quae aliis etiam tropis communis inuenitur, proprie refertur, quippe per allegoriam prae ceteris tropis plus et multiplicius aliud significatur quam dicitur* (Sed. *In mai.* 386.94–7).

However, the description which is common to other tropes properly refers to allegory on account of its excellence: indeed, allegory, more so than other tropes, signifies something different than what is said in more varied ways.

Similar philological considerations also lie at the heart of (biblical) exegesis. The theoretical foundations of allegory as a hermeneutical tool, with all subsequent implications for medieval exegesis, to a large extent grow out of the Middle and Neoplatonic theories of language. Starting out with the basic premise of Plato's ontology, namely that the physical world is merely a manifestation of the ideal intellectual realm, his followers came to the conclusion that all sensible realities, including language, must act as reflections, albeit imperfect ones, of that higher world. Daniel Boyarin (2010: 46) offered an accurate summary of the role of Platonism in the history of hermeneutics: 'The existence of allegory as a hermeneutical theory is made [...] dependent on a Platonic universe of

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<sup>236</sup> Sedulius Scottus observed that metaphor and allegory technically function in the same way, differing only in scale: metaphor applies to single words and allegory to extended pieces of discourse (cf. Sed. *In mai.* 374.9–13).

correspondences [...] between things seen and things unseen, copies and originals'. In other words, the very mechanism of figurative expression is rooted in the fundamental dichotomy of the cosmos.

This was the position of the Middle Platonist Philo of Alexandria who viewed all being as twofold: comprising the incorporeal intelligible world, which subsists in the mind of God, and the sensible realm, which is a mere copy of its noetic counterpart (Robertson 2006: 424–5). As copies of the unchanging Forms, things in the physical world are naturally joined with their superior, intelligible blueprints (Robertson 2006: 438). Since language itself is a sensible phenomenon, this ontology provided Philo with a solid foundation for a method of accessing transcendent meanings through their perceptible linguistic representations. Philo's exegetical model is generally twofold, comprising the literal meaning, which subsumes philological and historical analysis, and an allegorical interpretation that pertains to metaphysical truths and ethical lessons (Dillon 1983: 79; Kutash 2020: 136–7).

Central to Philo's theory of language (and his entire cosmology) is the concept of *logos* that exists within the divine mind and, as a lesser analogy, in the human mind.<sup>237</sup> The divine *logos* is an ideal, purely intellectual language: it is 'not that of verbs and nouns but of God, seen by the eye of the soul' (Philo, *Migration of Abraham*, IX.48; LCL 261: 158–9). In exceptional cases, it can be expressed in human language, but only by select individuals, such as Moses who was able, in the words of David Dawson (1992: 92), 'to use ordinary language to express his extraordinary insights'. But still, Dawson continues, the divine message, though clear to perceive, 'lies hidden in very indirect linguistic expressions marked by various forms of semantic indeterminacy'. Therefore, human languages are sometimes capable of imitating, albeit faintly and indirectly, the patterns of the divine *logos*.

Another pillar of Christian allegoresis is the cosmological scheme proposed by Plotinus in the *Enneads*. According to him, the font of all created nature is the One, an immaterial entity that transcends being itself. It brings forth the entire cosmos

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<sup>237</sup> *Logos* is one of the central concepts in late antique philosophy, including Platonism, Stoicism and, eventually, Christianity. It was briefly discussed in Chapter 3 in the context of the Stoic theory of meaning (cf. pp. 93–4). More broadly, the Stoic and the Philonic *logos* share some similarities in that they exist both universally and as an agent within the human mind. The Stoic *logos* has three aspects, summarised by Irvine (1994: 36) as follows: '(1) the universal, immanent *logos* as structure-in-nature [...] (2) significant statements [...] as thought-structured-into-discourse [...] (3) the internal *logos* in man as agent of thought which structures speech and all forms of discourse'.



through a series of emanations. The first level to derive from the One is the Mind (*νοῦς*) which encompasses all intellectual realities, including the Platonic Forms. Below it is the realm of the Soul (*ψυχή*) which contains desires of all living beings. The lowest level is Matter (*ὑλη*) which lacks all goodness and intelligibility of the upper tiers (cf. Struck 2010: 59). While Plotinus himself did not produce any substantial language-philosophical works, his ontological system helped justify the idea that ‘any given entity here in the physical world always also has other, hidden aspects to it’ (Struck 2010: 59) and that it is possible to uncover those hidden aspects by reversing the descending flow of emanation and intellectually ascending towards the One.

Perhaps the most significant channel through which these ideas entered Christian tradition is the Alexandrian school of exegesis to which belong Clement and Origen. Both exegetes advocated for a reading model which views Scripture as ‘an interweaving of two discourses, the one manifest and serving as a vehicle for the other, the sub-text which the exegete constitutes through interpretation’ (Irvine 1994: 250). Origen sees this dichotomic nature of Scripture as a reflection of the universal relationship between the corporeal and the incorporeal, whereby the perceivable world points *ad aliquas rerum incorporealiū causas* ‘to some patterns of incorporeal realities’ (Origen, *In Cant.* III.12; ed. Baehrens 1925: 212.16; trans. Lawson 1957: 223). It is the incorporeal *logos* that is hinted at in things and words of the physical world and that needs to be made manifest by means of interpretation. Indeed, this approach to exegesis is essentially Philonic. However, Clement and Origen introduced a crucial addition to this twofold allegorical method by subdividing the spiritual, non-literal meaning into further categories. The division proposed by Clement in *Stromata* is variously considered three- or fourfold due to unresolved textual problems in the surviving manuscripts. Henri de Lubac offered a reconciliatory reading:

Therefore, we must understand the purpose of the Law in three (four) ways: (either as showing a ‘type’), or as manifesting a sign (*sēmeion*), or as giving a precept (*entolēn*) for right conduct, or as announcing a prophecy (*prophēteian*) (Clement, *Stromata* I.xxviii.179; ed. Stählin 1906: 110.4–7; trans. de Lubac 1998–2009: vol. 1, 118).<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> For a discussion of editorial opinions on the reading of this passage, see de Lubac (1998–2009: vol. 1, 118–19).

If the 'fourfold' reading is to be accepted, one may recognise in Clement's scheme the outlines of the exegetical model that became widely used in the middle ages, comprising history ('type'), allegory ('sign'), morality ('precept') and anagogy ('prophecy'). But the more likely source of this knowledge for the Latin exegetes was Origen's *Peri archon* which circulated in the West in Rufinus' translation under the title *De principiis*. Origen's scheme is threefold and is summarised by de Lubac (1998–2009: vol. 1, 142–3) as follows: 'He believes that Scripture, like man, has a body and, soul and spirit. For this reason, he makes the following descriptive correlations: corporeal sense for history, psychical sense for morality, and spiritual sense for allegory (or anagogy).'<sup>239</sup> Indeed, we have already come across this division and the comparison to the threefold composition of man in Eucherius who, in turn, likely was a source to Virgilius Maro Grammaticus (cf. pp. 71–2). Origen's theory of exegesis also influenced other Latin authors, including Cassian, Ambrose and Jerome (de Lubac, 1998–2009: vol. 1, 142). It should be noted that the distinction between moral sense and allegory/anagogy, while a significant innovation, does not disrupt the basic opposition of literal and non-literal interpretation but rather introduces further sophistication to the latter (cf. Ohly 2005: 24).<sup>240</sup>

Besides the Alexandrians Clement and Origen, who advocated for the significance of non-literal interpretation, there existed another prominent exegetical tradition, known as the Antiochene school, whose adherents are usually considered to be proponents of strictly literal/historical interpretation. To the Antiochene school belong Diodorus of Tarsus, John Chrysostom and, indeed, Theodore of Mopsuestia whose name is familiar to us by now. Fundamentally, however, the Alexandrian and Antiochene approaches are not entirely opposed. As Frances Young (2003) suggested, both trace their methodologies to literary scholarship and differ principally in their understanding of figurative language in Scripture. Origen's idea of allegory builds on the idea that, in the act of transference of meaning, the mystical signified surpasses the historical signifier, the latter being incomplete without the

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<sup>239</sup> See Origen, *Peri archon* IV.ii.4; ed. Koetschau (1913: 312.22–31, 313.18–21).

<sup>240</sup> This is explicitly stated by Cassian: *θεωρητικη uero in duas diuiditur partes, id est in historicam interpretationem et intelligentiam spiritalem. [...] Spiritalis autem scientiae genera sunt tria, tropologia, allegoria, anagoge* 'The *θεωρητικη*, on the other hand, is divided into two parts – that is, into historical interpretation and spiritual understanding. [...] Now, there are three kinds of spiritual knowledge – tropology, allegory, and anagogy' (Cassian, *Conl.* XIV.viii.1; *CSEL* 13: 404.7–13; trans. Ramsey 1997: 509).

former (Irvine 1994: 252–7). Theodore, on the other hand, understood transference of meaning in terms of Pauline allegory where the referent and the reference are both historical events. He does not dispute the prophetic potential of Jewish history but usually allows such correspondences only within the Old Testament itself (Young 2003: 347; Wallace-Hadrill 1982: 32–3; Perhai 2016: 52–3). Modern scholars often refer to this approach as typology to distinguish it from allegory, where the higher meaning may not be rooted in history (although this distinction is contested).<sup>241</sup> Origen too utilised typology, without formally differentiating it from allegory, and never lost sight of the historical plane of the Bible (Martens 2008: 296–310). He emphasised that in the vast majority of cases, the biblical text has a clear historical significance and only rarely is the surface narrative outright impossible or implausible such as, for instance, when God is said to have walked in the garden of Eden in the afternoon breeze (Gen. 3:8). Only there does the higher sense stand on its own, without the support of the literal meaning (Irvine 1994: 256–7; Ramelli 2011: 346–7, 354; Watson 2018: 307–11).

Origen and Theodore thus seem to agree on the most fundamental level in their distinction between sense and reference. They both concede the underlying principle of allegory, especially in the specific Pauline sense to whose authority exegetes, including the Alexandrians and the Antiochenes, habitually appeal (de Lubac 1998–2009: vol. 2, 4; Di Mattei 2006: 102–3). Paul’s exegesis *per allegoriam* in Galatians 4:21–31 defines Christian historical consciousness by establishing ‘the relationship of meaning between prefiguration and fulfilment’ (Ohly 2005: 25). By forging an immediate link between the Old Testament narratives and the events in the life of Christ and his church, it reconciles the two testaments and creates a universal formula of a twofold meaning: ‘outside and inside, before and after, shadow and substance, figurative expression and truth, letter and spirit, prophecy and realization’ (de Lubac, 1998–2009: vol. 1, 247) – *historia* and *sensus*. In the interplay between the literal and the figurative meaning, the latter encompasses not just allegory but the anagogical and moral sense as well, thus distilling the fourfold structure into a fundamental dichotomy. The boundary between the two is slightly

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<sup>241</sup> The term ‘typology’ was actively used by Jean Daniélou and scholars following him. De Lubac doubted the validity of the term and insisted that it does not apply to patristic exegesis (Daniélou 1955: 139–73; de Lubac 1998–2009: vol. 1, 259). For an overview of relevant scholarship, see Martens (2008: 285–96).

blurred by historical typology which may gravitate either towards history or towards Christological allegory.<sup>242</sup>

### ***Irish Exegetical Models***

Irish exegesis cannot be considered a homogenous tradition. It absorbed a variety of patristic ideas on the manifold senses of Scripture. Based on the conclusions of the previous section, below I examine Irish variations on the fourfold model as well as the simplified dichotomy of *historia* and *sensus*.

#### *Fourfold Exegesis*

One of the better known Irish expositions of the fourfold model is found in the ‘Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter’:

*Atá cetharde as toiscide isnaib salmaib .i. cétna stoir ocus stoir tánaise, síens ocus morolus. Cétna stoir fri Duíd ocus fri Solomon [...]. Stoir tánaise fri Ezechiam [...]. Síens fri Críst, frisin n-eclais talmandai ocus nemdai. Morolus fri cech nóib.*

There are four things that are necessary in the psalms, to wit, the first history, and the second history, the sense and the morality. The first history refers to David and to Solomon [...]. The second history to Hezekiah [...]. The meaning to Christ, to the earthly and heavenly church. The morality to every saint (OIT 312–20; translation lightly modified).

An identical schema can also be found in the late-eighth-century *Bibelwerk* or ‘The Irish Reference Bible’, specifically in the section titled *Pauca de historia psalorum*, and in Airbertach mac Cosse’s early-eleventh-century poem on the Psalter. The latter two texts are closely linked to the ‘Old Irish Treatise’.<sup>243</sup> One may notice that this specific model is exclusively associated with Psalter exegesis. The fourfold order of signification developed here is formally reminiscent of the more or less standard fourfold schema but contains two important differences which require a few comments. First, in the Irish version the term *síans* seems to conflate the

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<sup>242</sup> Here it is worth referring back to the terminological debate concerning allegory and typology (cf. n. 241). As Martens showed in his analysis of Origen’s exegesis, the two concepts do not compete with each other but are rather used synonymously to denote nonliteral exegesis as opposed to literalism. Under figurative interpretation is understood any interpretation which involves a transference of meaning (Martens 2008: 296–306).

<sup>243</sup> For Airbertach’s poem, see stanzas 14–17, edited and translated in Ó Néill (1977: 32) who also pointed out that the poem is a simplified reworking of the ‘Old Irish Treatise’ (Ó Néill 1977: 26–8; 2014: 122–35). The passage from the *Bibelwerk* is unedited and can be found in two manuscripts preserving the work: Paris, BN Lat. 11561, f. 56va3–23 and Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 14276, f. 100r8–20. The section *Pauca de historia psalorum* immediately follows the introduction to the Psalter which has been edited by Martin McNamara (1973: 291–8). He also noted that the introduction is closely related to the ‘Old Irish Treatise’ and added that ‘both probably represent the teaching common in Irish schools of the period’ (McNamara 1973: 229).

Christological allegory and the eschatological dimension of anagogy. Second, the centrepiece of the Irish schema are its two historical senses: one contemporaneous with the composition of the psalms and one referring to generations after David, but not exceeding the timeframe of the Old Testament.

Regarding the double historical sense, this emphasis on literal interpretation has often been taken as evidence that Irish exegesis developed under a heavy influence of the Antiochene tradition.<sup>244</sup> Robert Ramsay (1912: 468) considered the Irish fourfold scheme, with its two historical senses, to be ‘the final fusion of the two schools of interpretation’: the Antiochene and the Alexandrian. We might add that, since the basic principles of interpretation used by Theodore and Origen (and subsequent users of allegorical exegesis) were not so drastically different, such fusion was perhaps a natural development rather than a purposeful attempt to reconcile conflicting positions. The double historical sense in the passage from the ‘Old Irish Treatise’ presupposes a certain transference of meaning as the ‘second history’ (*stoir tánaise*) acknowledges the prophetic nature of certain psalms (even if within the Old Testament itself) and creates an additional, nonliteral reference which necessitates a typological, if not an allegorical, reading.

As for *síans*, a borrowing from Latin *sensus*, it is the last term for meaning remaining to be discussed within this study.<sup>245</sup> Interestingly, the St Gall glosses which are otherwise rich on attestations of meaning-related vocabulary are less so in the case of *síans*: it only appears six times and mostly refers to the meaning of grammatical categories (cf. pp. 168–9).<sup>246</sup> It is somewhat better represented in the Milan corpus which supplies us with fourteen attestations across eleven glosses. One of these

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<sup>244</sup> Ramsay (1912: 453–76), McNamara (1973: 255–9; 1986: 64–8; 2000: 385–93), Ó Néill (2002: 77). At the same time, Daniel Watson (2018: 311 n. 1183) hinted that the historical/literal level of Irish exegesis might have been influenced by the writings of Jerome, famously a student of Donatus and a proponent of a philological approach to textual criticism. This suggests that the focus on the literal sense in Irish texts cannot be considered a purely Antiochene phenomenon.

<sup>245</sup> Note that the word *síans* should be distinguished from *séis*, which is a cognate of Latin *sensus* but was not borrowed from it (Stokes 1894: 94). *Séis* is an older formation than *síans*. While it primarily denotes ‘meaning’ and ‘sense’ (e.g. Wb. 14d28), its other important application is to refer to ‘some subdivision of the programme of the bardic schools’ (*eDIL*, s.v. *séis*). This is the case for the title of a text discussed in Chapter 1 – *Dliged sésa a huraicept na mac sesa*. Similar usage can be found in ‘O’Davoren’s Glossary’ (O’Dav. 880; cf. *CIH* IV 1500.2). It also appears in the eighth-century ‘Cauldron of Poesy’ (cf. n. 214 and p. 239), where it is stated that the second of the three cauldrons which represent different types of knowledge possessed by a person – *Coire Éрмаi* – is ‘where senses are distinguished / where one approaches musical art’ (*deligter cíalla / cengar sési* (*Caldron* 13; ed. and trans. Breatnach 1981: 68–9)). The pairing of *cíall* and *séis* here may point to the idea that poetical skill requires mastery of understanding and expressing meaning.

<sup>246</sup> Sg. 39a4=39a6f, 39a29=39a27gg, 149b2=149b13c, 221b1=221b1a, 221b3=221b2c.

glosses demonstrates that like *sensus*, *síans* can refer to sense-perception rather than signification (Ml. 94c3).<sup>247</sup> On other occasions, *síans* has more familiar applications, such as interpretation of a passage (Ml. 36a32, 36a33, 36a35) and the meaning of a foreign word (Ml. 37a6, 37a10). What sets *síans* apart from other terms for meaning is its specialised connotation with biblical exegesis. As Lambert (2016: 89) noted, in the Milan glosses *síans* can refer to ‘the mystical and prophetic meaning of the psalms inasmuch as they may announce the coming of the Messiah’. The most illuminating example of this usage occurs in the glosses to Theodore’s remarks on Psalm 1:

*[Q]uoniam non est nobis propositum latius cuncta persequi, sed summatim dictorum omnium sensus attingere, – ut possit lecturis expositionis prima facie relucere, illis relinquentes occasiones maioris intelligentiae si uoluerint aliqua addere, quae tamen a praemissa interpretatione non discrepent (CCSL 88A: 7.82–7).*

[For it is not our intention to follow everything very broadly, but to touch upon meanings of all things said summarily, so that the exposition may shine at first sight to those who are to read [it], leaving them opportunities for greater understanding if they wish to add some things which, however, do not disagree with the interpretation ahead].

[gl. *prima facie*]: *innastoir air is ed asdulem dún doengnu instoir.*

[of the history, for history is that which is most desirable for us to understand (Ml. 14d7)].

[gl. *occasiones*]: *.i. sens 7 moralus.*

[i.e. the sense and the morality (Ml. 14d9)].

[gl. *aliqua*]: *issamlid léicfimmíni doibsom aisndis dintsens 7 dinmoralus manip ecoir frisinstoir adfiadamni.*

[it is thus we will leave to them the exposition of the sense and the morality, if it is not at variance with the history that we relate (Ml. 14d10)].

The main text vaguely hints at two levels of interpretation: a basic literal one proposed by the author and *maior intelligentia* ‘greater understanding’ which lies under the surface (*facies*) and which should not contradict the literal meaning. The glosses, however, independently postulate an Origen-esque threefold scheme. Within this model, *síans* represents the spiritual sense, distinct from *stoir* ‘history’

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<sup>247</sup> The interplay of the outward and inward meanings of *sensus/síans* is demonstrated in the Würzburg glosses. The glossator juxtaposes *sensus carnis* ‘the sense of the flesh’, with which certain people worship angels in Col. 2:18, with inner sense which may refer to spiritual ‘sight’ (cf. pp. 227–8, 245–6): *ní issíansib spirítáldib móiti* ‘not in spiritual senses does he boast him’ (Wb. 27a29).

and *moralis* ‘moral sense’. A similar approach emerges from the glosses on the fragmentary Psalter of St Caimín (cf. pp. 64–5), where the three senses are carefully woven into the manuscript’s mise-en-page, with the historical interpretation placed in the left margin, spiritual in the right and moral in the interlinear space (Ó Néill 2007: 26–9). Among Latin fathers, the closest equivalent to this threefold approach can be found in Jerome’s *Epistula CXX: Triplex in corde nostro descriptio et regula scripturarum est: prima, ut intelligamus eas iuxta historiam; secunda, iuxta tropologiam; tertia, iuxta intelligentiam spiritalem* ‘The plan and rule of Scriptures is threefold in our heart: first, as we understand them according to history; second, according to tropology; third, according to spiritual understanding’ (Jerome, *Epist. CXX.12; CSEL 55: 513.26–514.2*). A concept like Jerome’s *spiritalis intelligentia* could be one of the sources behind the vernacular *síans*.

It is interesting that Irish scholars, at least those working on Psalter exegesis, found it suitable to refer to such a complex idea as non-literal interpretation with just one word – *síans* – without any additional qualifiers, such as Jerome’s *spiritalis intelligentia* or Theodore’s *maior intelligentia*. At the same time, this does not seem as strange a development if we take into account the depth with which Irish intellectuals approached the very concept of meaning, as discussed in Chapter 5. The narrow, exegetical usage of *síans* builds on some of the more general ideas regarding signification, namely that meaning is an abstract concept, that it is removed from the physical reference and that it can represent the contents of an individual’s mind. Thus ‘meaning’ can as easily be understood as ‘transferred meaning’ without any additional semantic manipulations.

Importantly, Martin McNamara (1973: 257) observed that on a few occasions this specialised usage of *síans* was transferred back onto the original Latin term *sensus*. This is the case in the Hiberno-Latin *Eclogae tractatorum in Psalterium* (ca. 800) and the *Bibelwerk*. Otherwise, *sensus* does not appear to have the connection to allegorical meaning in the Latin tradition outside of Hiberno-Latin exegesis.

It may be added that in the Milan glosses the term *rún* ‘mystery’ is sometimes used in the same function as *síans* such as, for example, when Psalm 21 is interpreted as referring to David historically and to Christ mystically:

*.i. intan citaroichet insalmsa is immaircide do duaid oc eregim re abisolon mad dustoir.*

[i.e. when this psalm was first sung; it is appropriate to David, (who was) complaining before Absalom, if it is according to history' (Ml. 44b4; translation modified)].

*.i. crist maduruín.*

[i.e. Christ, if it is according to the mystic sense (Ml. 44b6)].<sup>248</sup>

*Rún* is also used to contrast the *fiugor* 'figure' of a Psalm, which pertains to David as the author, and the mystery with which certain passages are interpolated in the Gospels with a reference to Christ (Ml. 38c7, 45a2–3).<sup>249</sup> The use of *rún* as an equivalent for *síans* further confirms that this is not merely any type of non-literal signification but one that specifically pertains to the mysteries of Christ and his church.

Alongside the unique fourfold model with a double historical sense, Irish scholars were no strangers to the more standard schema where non-literal meanings, viz. allegorical and moral, were considered the ultimate goal of hermeneutic work. Contrary to how some modern scholars have perceived Irish exegesis, a contemporary seventh-century testimony by Aldhelm, himself a student of the Irish, paints a picture of a tradition strong in allegory: *allegoricae potiora ac tropologicae disputationis bipertita bis oracula aethralibus opacorum mellita in aenigmatibus problematum siticulose sumentes carpunt* 'they thirstily enjoy the twice bipartite oracles of allegorical and tropological disputation especially, honeyed in ethereal enigmas of opaque problems' (Aldhelm, *Epist. V*; *MGH AA* 15: 490.18–491.2).<sup>250</sup> Here, although Aldhelm specifically mentions fourfold interpretation (*bipertita bis oracula* 'twice bipartite oracles'), there is no indication as to the other two senses besides allegory and tropology. They may as well be first and second history but, in

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<sup>248</sup> Similar examples can be also found in the Old Irish glosses on the Gospel of Mark in Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria, F. IV.1, fasc. 7. For example: *.i. colinn crist madu ruin* 'i.e. Christ's body, according to the mystic meaning' (*Thes.* I: 493 n. 123b). Other examples are *Thes.* I: 491 n. 103; 492 n. 110e. Michael Cahill, who analysed the glosses' origins and dated them to the third quarter of the ninth century, noted that the glossator is 'quite at home using the allegorical method' and questioned the viability of characterising Irish exegesis as historical (Cahill 1999: 177–8, 190–3).

<sup>249</sup> We have also seen that the term *rún/mysterium* are applied to the 'mystical' and moral meaning of letters (cf. pp. 62–3, 199)

<sup>250</sup> The importance of Aldhelm's contemporary testimony has been highlighted by Michael Herren (1998: 393). However, in modern scholarship, Martin McNamara remained sceptical regarding the importance of non-literal interpretation in Irish tradition, particularly in Psalter exegesis, claiming that 'the prevailing, if not the sole method followed was the historical not the allegorical' (McNamara 1973: 210, 257–8; 1986: 59–69). I do not agree with this appraisal in light of the evidence presented here.



any case, they are clearly not what Aldhelm considers the most remarkable part of Irish exegetical learning.

A more explicit exposition of the fourfold sense of the type proposed by Cassian (cf. n. 240) can be found in the anonymous Hiberno-Latin commentary on the Gospel of Luke in the manuscript Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, MS Lat. 997 (Salzburg, s. ix<sup>in</sup>).<sup>251</sup> The author develops a lengthy discussion of the word *columba* 'dove' in Luke 2:24 and suggests, among other things, that a dove is a 'figure' of Scriptures:

*Plerumque columba diuinarum scripturarum figuram tenet, quando dicitur: 'Pennae columbae deargentatae' usque 'auri'. Quid argenti color nisi eloquentiam diuinae historiae significat? Per auri autem formam sensum triplicem spiritalem indicat idest tropologiam, anagogen, allegoriam* (ed. Kelly 1974: 18.219–23).

[Very commonly a dove holds the figure of divine Scriptures, when it is said: 'the wings of a dove [are] covered with silver' up to '[its pinions with the gleam] of gold' (Ps. 67:14). What does the colour of silver signify if not the eloquence of the divine history? Through the figure of gold, he indicates the triple spiritual sense, that is, tropology, anagogy and allegory].

Like Cassian, the author starts with a dichotomy: silver and gold, historical sense and spiritual interpretation. The latter comprises three elements: tropology, anagogy and allegory (cf. Cassian, *Conl.* XIV.viii.1; *CSEL* 13: 404). While the text does not offer practical examples of using all four levels simultaneously, it demonstrates that this model was not unfamiliar to Irish scholars.

We do find this schema used to full effect elsewhere, namely on an often overlooked page in the Book of Armagh (Dublin, TCD, MS 52). This early-ninth-century manuscript contains Patrician material and an almost complete copy of the New Testament. In-between the end of Revelation and the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles there is an inserted folio (f. 171) which preserves valuable artefacts of Irish exegetical tradition. Its *recto* is an illustration depicting the plan of Heavenly Jerusalem which suitably closes the Book of Revelation. The exegetical value of this diagram has been fruitfully explored by Thomas O'Loughlin (2000) and, more recently, by Eleanor Jackson (2021). But it is the *verso* which is of interest to us here. Since f. 171 was initially inserted to complete the text of Revelation, the *verso* of that folio, facing the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles on f. 172r, was initially

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<sup>251</sup> On the manuscript, see Bischoff (1998–2017: vol. 3, 487 no. 7194). On this text, see Bischoff (1954: 263–4); Kelly (1974: ix–xi).

empty.<sup>252</sup> But, given its positioning, the page was eventually filled with what Edward Gwynn identified as notes for a Pentecostal homily and ‘matter relating to the opening chapters of the Acts’ (Gwynn 1913: cxxix).<sup>253</sup>

The text on the page is arranged in two columns. However, the discussion of Pentecost itself only starts at the end of column A, after a thorough exegetical build-up. Most of column A is taken up by the fourfold interpretation of a verse from Psalm 45: *Fluminis impetus laetificat civitatem Dei* ‘The stream of the river makes glad the city of God’ (Ps. 45:5; trans. modified). The four senses receive visual markers on the page. The three non-literal senses are indicated with the words *sensui*, *moraliter* and *per anagogen*, in addition to being highlighted with Roman numerals in the margins where *sensus* is marked with ii, moral sense with iii, anagogy with iiiii. The missing number one should naturally refer to historical interpretation which, in a departure from the otherwise consistent nomenclature of meanings, is indicated by the abbreviation *hir.* – Hieronymus. A similar way to mark historical sense by way of Jerome was also discovered by McNamara (1973: 226–7) in the contemporary Hiberno-Latin text *Eclogae tractatorum in Psalterium*. He pointed out that the compiler of the *Eclogae* quotes significant portions of the Milan Psalm-commentary attributing them to Jerome through the formula *hir. in his.* (= *Hirunimus in historica investigatione*). There is no doubt that our homilist is using the same strategy: indeed, the passage that is marked with *hir.* belongs not to Jerome but to Theodore of Mopsuestia which suggests that both authors had access to the Latin translation of his commentary in the version preserved in the Milan manuscript but were under a mistaken impression regarding its authorship. The historical interpretation proposed for the abovementioned verse is as follows:

[*Hir*] *Excursus Assirii exercitus uastauit Siriam rege pariter extincto, ut Issaias praedixerat, inducet dominus super uos aquam fluminis ualidam, regem*

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<sup>252</sup> See Gwynn (1913: cxxix). This is a rather unusual arrangement as canonically Acts are placed after the Gospels while Revelation closes the New Testament. Gwynn (1913: cxxvii) took this as evidence that Acts were initially unavailable to the scribe and were copied at a later stage. Richard Sharpe (1982: 6 n. 16, 14), however, objected to this by pointing out that Acts were well known in Ireland by the early-ninth century, when the manuscript was written. At the same time, grouping Acts with Apocalypse was a common occurrence in medieval biblical canon (e.g. Aug, *De doct. christ.* II.viii.13; *CCSL* 32: 39–40; Cassiod. *Inst.* I.ix.1; ed. Mynors 1961: 32.26–7). See also van Liere (2014: 72).

<sup>253</sup> There has been very little scholarship dedicated to this page. The text was partially edited by Stokes and Strachan as part of the *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* on account of a few Old Irish words and sentences that it contains (*Thes.* I: 495–6). Apart from Gwynn, the contents of the page have been, to my knowledge, only revisited twice. Dagmar Bronner (2016) analysed linguistic features of the Old Irish content and Hilary Richardson (2002: 212–4) discussed the section on the significance of the number seven in Pentecost in relation to symbolic references to the Holy Spirit in early Irish art.

*Assiriorum. Hic ergo Hierusolimam laetificauit uastandis hostibus et obsedione soluendo* (TCD, MS 52, f. 171va7–13; cf. CCSL 88A: 204.28–32).

[An Assyrian expedition laid waste to Syria, simultaneously destroying the king, as Isaiah prophesied: the Lord shall bring upon you the mighty floodwaters, [i.e.] the king of the Assyrians. With this, he gave joy to Jerusalem, defeating [its] enemies and breaking the siege].

This interpretation is technically not the ‘first’ but the ‘second history’ as it pertains to events that happened centuries after David, when Jerusalem was besieged by the joint armies of Aram (Syria) and Samaria (cf. Is. 7–9). Theodore takes the words *fluminis impetus* ‘the stream of the river’ to signify the Assyrian army which defeated the enemies of Judea at the appeal of king Ahaz, washing away, as it were, the siege of Jerusalem (cf. Is. 8:7–8).

The second meaning given for the same passage is *sensus* which, much like vernacular *síans* is used without any qualifiers and by default signifies allegorical or mystical meaning. The interpretation designated as *sensus* is a passage from Isaiah 66:12–14 where Jerusalem is painted metaphorically as a mother giving birth to her children:

*Sensui: Ecce ego declinabo auriam super eam quasi fluium pacis et quasi torrentem inundantem gloriam gentium; in Hierusalem consulabimini et gaudebit cor uestrum* (TCD, MS 52, f. 171va13–17).

[To the sense: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem and your heart shall rejoice].

Being a brief conspectus for a homily, the text gives no further explanation for these lines. But we may assume, considering the mystical focus of the term *sensus* in Irish sources, that this quotation would perhaps invoke Jerome’s reading of this passage as an allegory for the Church established by Christ and the apostles in Jerusalem to be the mother of all believers, with the river denoting the stream of faith flowing towards it as nourishment (Jerome, *Comm. in Esaiam* XVIII.lxvi.12; CCSL 73A: 779.8–780.17).

Next follows the explanation of the moral sense of the same verse for which I have not been able to identify the source. It offers yet another way to understand the phrase *fluminis impetus* ‘stream of the river’: *Moraliter: fluius conpunctionis animam hominis iusti consecrat* ‘Moral meaning: the stream of remorse sanctifies the soul of a righteous person’ (TCD, MS 52, f. 171va17–18).

But the key piece of exegesis is offered under the label of anagogy. It connects Psalm 45 to the coming of the Holy Spirit thus finally arriving at the main topic of the homily – Pentecost:

*Per anagogen: Quis est fluminis impetus? Ille nimirum de quo dominus per Iohannem, qui credit in me, flumina de uentre eius fluent aquae uiuae. Haec dicit dominus Ihesus de spiritu sancto, quem accepturi essent credentes in eum. Vide magnificentiam maiestatis. Sic in terris tribuitur aeclessiae dei, ut tamen in caelis laetificet ciuitatem dei, id est regnorum caelestium ciues (TCD, MS 52, f. 171va19–27).*

[Through anagogy: What is the stream of the river? [It is], without a doubt, that of which the Lord [spoke] through John: ‘Whoever believes in me, rivers of living water will flow from within them. With these [words] the Lord Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit whom those who believed in him would receive (cf. John 7:38–9). Behold the magnificence of the majesty. Likewise, it is bestowed to the church of God on earth, so that it would make glad the city of God in heaven, that is, the citizens of the heavenly kingdoms].

This is perhaps the most curious fragment as regards its source. It is borrowed almost verbatim from the work *De spiritu sancto* by Faustus of Riez, a fifth-century theologian hailing from Britain, the abbot of Lérins and later the bishop of Riez (cf. Faust. *De spiritu sancto* 1.13; *CSEL* 21: 129.13–19). While I have not been able to trace the transmission of this work to Ireland, it is certain that his writings were familiar to Irish intellectuals: already ca. 600 St Columbanus praised *sancti scilicet Fausti luculentissimam elegantissimamque doctrinam* ‘the most perspicuous and polished doctrine of St Faustus’ in one of his sermons (Columb. *Instr.* II.1; ed. and trans. Walker 1957: 68.7–8, 69).<sup>254</sup>

The author of our text borrows Faustus’ passage and styles it as anagogy whose function within the fourfold model is to point towards heavenly realities in an eschatological anticipation (de Lubac 1998–2009: vol. 2, 181–2). It helps to connect the earthly Church to the ‘city of God in heaven’ by means of the prophecy of the coming of the Holy Spirit which will bring salvation to all nations through the apostles’ multilingual preaching.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> In the same passage Columbanus also refers to Faustus as his teacher who is *tempore et merito et scientia me prior* ‘senior in time, deserts and knowledge’. While the attribution of *Instructio* II to Columbanus had previously been in doubt, Clare Stancliffe (1997: 186–96) has convincingly demonstrated that the reference to Faustus ‘bears all the marks of Columbanus’ hand’. Faustus’ name in the history of theology is associated with his participation in the predestination debate between the followers of Augustine and Pelagius. See Charles-Edwards (2013: 199–202).

<sup>255</sup> It is worth noting that the same verse (Ps. 45:5) is glossed in the Southampton Psalter with a similar reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit: *FLUMINIS IMPITUS LAETIFICAT CIUITATEM DEI .i. aduentus Spiritus Sancti super aeclesiam primitiuam ‘laetam’ fecit eam* ‘“The stream of the river makes

Thus, this fourfold exegesis gradually leads the reader (or the potential listener) towards the subject of Pentecost which will be taken up in column B. At the same time, I would suggest, these four meanings may be informed by and create an interplay with the contents of f. 171r, i.e. the plan of Heavenly Jerusalem. As we have seen, only the moral meaning does not make a direct reference to Jerusalem, earthly or heavenly. Ultimately, however, all four, in one way or another, mirror the textbook example of fourfold exegesis based on the word Jerusalem. While its most well-known formulation is found in Cassian's *Conlationes*,<sup>256</sup> it is not necessary to leave the Hiberno-Latin milieu to find parallels, as Sedulius Scottus reproduces the full scheme in his commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians (Gal. 4:26):

*Quatuor figurae, ut historia, allegoria, tropologia, anagoge, hoc solo nomine quod est Hierusalem significantur. Nam secundum historiam civitas est Iudaeorum; secundum allegoriam Ecclesia Christi; secundum anagogen civitas Dei illa coelestis, quae est mater omnium nostrum; secundum tropologiam anima hominis, quae frequenter hoc nomine aut increpatur, aut laudatur a Domino (Sed. In Galat. IV; PL 103: 191A).*

[Four figures, namely history, allegory, tropology and anagogy, are signified by that one name – Jerusalem. For according to history, it is the city of the Jews; according to allegory, it is the Church of Christ; according to anagogy, it is the Heavenly City of God which is the mother of us all; according to tropology, it is the soul of man which by this name is often either rebuked or praised by God].<sup>257</sup>

This brief exposition accounts for all four interpretations proposed in the Armagh homily. Both also present rare examples where the fourfold exegetical schema is deployed to its full extent, demonstrating the potential of hermeneutics as a tool for mining the 'halo of virtualities', to use Barthes' expression, where multiple latent meanings float, waiting to be drawn out and realised. The purpose of such a rigorous exegetical exercise is similar to the purpose of the Jerusalem-diagram on the preceding page in the Book of Armagh. Although, technically speaking, the diagram only represents one sense – anagogy, – as it depicts St John's eschatological vision of

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glad the city of God" i.e. the coming of the Holy Spirit upon *ecclesia primitiva* made it glad' (ed. Ó Néill 2012: 114.23–5).

<sup>256</sup> *Secundum historiam ciuitas Iudaeorum, secundum allegoriam ecclesia Christi, secundum anagogen ciuitas dei illa caelestis, quae est mater omnium nostrum, secundum tropologiam anima hominis* 'According to history it is the city of the Jews. According to allegory it is the Church of Christ. According to anagogy it is that heavenly city of God "which is the mother of us all." According to tropology it is the soul of the human being' (Cassian, *Conl.* XIV.viii.4; *CSEL* 13: 405.15–19; trans. Ramsey 1997: 510). On this trope among patristic and medieval authors, see de Lubac (1998–2009: vol. 2, 199–201).

<sup>257</sup> The same example of fourfold exegesis is also found in the introduction to the *Bibelwerk* (BW, *Praef.* 52.iii.25–30; *CCCM* 173: 23).

the Heavenly City, it was, according to Mary Carruthers (1998: 222), ‘understood not as a real thing, but as a cognitively important device to be painted in the mind for the purposes of further meditation and prayer’.<sup>258</sup> It thus seems likely that both the diagram and the methodical four-step exegesis embody the iterative character of contemplative thought: the mind treads the same ground – the closed quadrilateral shape of the city wall or the same psalm-verse considered four times – but, in doing so, it is led on an ascending path from the physical image towards an inner image, from history towards mystery. These parallels may not be coincidental in the context of the Book of Armagh, since both the Revelation and the Acts appear to have been copied by the same scribe.<sup>259</sup>

### *Twofold Model*

Based on the evidence presented above, there is no doubt that Irish exegetes were well-versed in fourfold exegesis and were capable of using it with considerable flexibility. However, frequently authors would operate on no more than two hermeneutic levels, depending on the purpose of the work. Ailerán, for instance, opts for the allegorical and moral senses in his exposition of Hebrew names.<sup>260</sup> But more often exegetes return to the simple Platonic dichotomy of letter and spirit. Bernhard Bischoff (1954: 210) observed: *In der Praxis wird meist zwischen historia und sensus geschieden; in diesem sind moralischer und allegorischer Sinn häufig zusammengefasst* ‘In practice, the distinction is made mostly between *historia* and *sensus*; the latter often encompasses the moral and allegorical sense.’ This is the case, for example, in the *Bibelwerk* where both *historia* and *sensus* are valued and their authority is connected with the names of Jerome and Ambrose respectively (ed. McNamara 1973: 292).<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Carruthers’ remark refers to medieval descriptions and artistic representations of Heavenly Jerusalem in general. She also analysed several eleventh-century continental illustrations that are reminiscent of the image in the Book of Armagh (Carruthers 1998: 150–5). Carruthers’ theory is applied to the Armagh diagram by Jackson (2021: 111).

<sup>259</sup> Richard Sharpe (1982: 3–14) established that the manuscript consists of six distinguishable booklets and that booklets D (Catholic Epistles, Revelation) and E (Acts of the Apostles) were copied by the same scribe – Scribe A.

<sup>260</sup> Ailerán’s *Interpretatio mystica et moralis progenitorum domini Iesu Christi* is edited and translated by Aidan Breen (1995).

<sup>261</sup> Another locus in the *Bibelwerk* where the dichotomy of *historia* and *sensus* is used in the exposition of the ‘twelve divisions’ of Scripture (BW, *Praef.* 52.xii.61–4; *CCCM* 173: 25; cf. n. 257). Similarly, McNamara (1986: 57–9) noted that the ‘Catena on the Psalms’ from Vatican, Pal. Lat. 68 contrasts the historical sense with the spiritual through the formulae *historialiter* and *spiritualiter*. Ó Néill (2012: xlvi–lv) also discussed consistent twofold interpretation in the glosses to the Southampton Psalter.

Returning to the Armagh homily on f. 171v, this type of twofold exegesis takes centre stage in column B. The main subject of column B is the typological comparison between the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai and Pentecost.<sup>262</sup> It initially grows out of a passage copied almost verbatim from a Pentecostal homily by Gregory of Nazianzen in Latin translation by Rufinus (TCD MS 52, f. 171vb2–12; cf. Greg. Naz. *Orationes* IV.i.2–3; CSEL 46: 141.9–142.1). The key statement in this introductory matter is the following: *Celebrantur apud Iudeos sollempnitates quaedam, sed secundum literam; in legem enim spiritalem non poterat peruenire Iudeus* ‘Certain festivals are celebrated by the Jews but according to the letter; for a Jew could not attain the spiritual law’ (TCD MS 52, f. 171vb6–8). With this, the Old Testament, as it pertains to Jewish history and customs, is relegated to the domain of literal meaning. The level of spiritual sense does exist in the Hebrew Bible but it is somewhat of a pocket dimension – hidden from the eyes of those who do not know how to enter it, i.e. those who do not read it in the typological light of Christianity.

The comparison between the giving of the Law and Pentecost is then introduced directly:

*Similis figura et dissimilis. Lex per Moysen data. G[ratia et ueritas per Iesum Christum facta est] (John 1:17). Lex per seruum data in primo pentecoste. Gratia per mediatorem manifestata reos liberauit in secundo pentecoste* (TCD MS 52, f. 171vb15–18).

[The figure is similar and dissimilar. The Law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Law was given by a servant in the first Pentecost. Grace, which was made manifested through a mediator, freed the condemned in the second Pentecost].

Following this, the juxtaposition between the two events is laid out in two columns, to aid visual comprehension (f. 171vb19–25):<sup>263</sup>

<b>[First Pentecost]</b>	<b>[Second Pentecost]</b>
<i>Sollumun litre</i> ‘the festival of the letter’	<i>Sollumun rúnae</i> ‘the festival of the mystery’
<i>Sollumun stoir</i> ‘the festival of history’	<i>Sollumun senso</i> ‘the festival of the sense’
<i>in Sina</i> ‘on Sinai’	<i>in Sión</i> ‘in Zion’
<i>in diserto</i> ‘in the desert’	<i>in ciuitate</i> ‘in the city’

<sup>262</sup> The association between the two events, as well as between Pentecost and the Jewish feast of Weeks, was an important element of patristic Pentecostal exegesis used, for instance, by Origen, Augustine and later by Bede (Cremin 2020: 80–4). There are also significant similarities between the Armagh material and the homily *De die Pentecostes* which is preserved in Latin and Middle Irish in the *Leabhar Breac* homiliary (ed. and trans. Atkinson 1887: 190–8, 436–42). These parallels still await a dedicated study. This homily is also discussed in Chapter 7 (pp. 255–7).

<sup>263</sup> For this table, I follow Stokes and Strachan’s edition (*Thes.* I: 496).

<i>Moisi</i> 'to Moses'	<i>cxx</i> 'to 120 [disciples]'
<i>in tabulas</i> 'onto tablets'	<i>in corda</i> 'into the hearts'
<i>in xl diebus</i> 'in 40 days'	<i>in una hora</i> 'instantly' <sup>264</sup>

What catches our eye in this comparison are the four 'festivals': those of *liter* and *rún*, of *stoir* and *séns*. Designated by the word *sollummun* 'festival', these four seem to indicate, in the first place, the nature of Pentecostal celebration in the Old and New Testament. But otherwise, the terminology is essentially that of exegesis, determining how these celebrations are to be 'read' by a Christian audience. Thus they become reimagined as signs within the linguistic space rather than events in the physical world. The world becomes a text, nearing Derrida's well-known maxim: *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* 'there is nothing outside of the text' (Derrida 1976: 158).

We have seen by now that the two pairs of terms used here are more or less synonymous. Both *liter* and *stoir* refer to the primary signification which obtains between words and things, while *rún* and *síans* denote allegorical or transferred meaning, one degree removed from the primary sense. Indeed, Mosaic Law consists of written precepts that aim to regulate the flesh, thus realising the basic connection between meaning, word and thing, whereas the law of grace brought by Christ is a spiritual command whose true sense cannot be captured in human language and therefore has to be read between the lines where meanings are less fixed and more profound. The letter belongs to the Old Testament but the spirit to the New, in an echo of 2 Cor. 3:6: *Qui et idoneos nos fecit ministros novi testamenti: non litterae sed Spiritus; littera enim occidit, Spiritus autem vivificat* '[He] has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life'. This is also an evocation of Gregory of Nazianzen's statement regarding letter and spirit that prefaces the comparison in the Book of Armagh. The fact that this witness to twofold hermeneutic paradigm occurs side-by-side with the fourfold exposition in column A creates an interesting juxtaposition of the two interpretative models and demonstrates the scholars' flexibility in using them.

Another proponent of a twofold exegetical model is Eriugena, who brings us somewhat closer to the classical and late antique prototypes. Like Augustine and, to

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<sup>264</sup> This is a curious bit of Hiberno-Latin lexicon, a literal translation of the vernacular phrase *i n-óenúair* 'in one hour' which idiomatically means 'at the same time, immediately' (*eDIL*, s.v. *úar* 2).



some extent, Philo, Eriugena is in favour of the idea that the human mind operates with words that are of a different nature than the ones that are spoken. They are the inner words, 'concepts of the mind', a form of the universal *logos* (Moran 1996: 259). But while in the strict Aristotelian sense specific words signify specific thoughts, in a metaphorical sense all words, much like all visible creation, can be viewed as a symbol of what is hidden. In this Eriugena clearly follows the Platonists. In the fifth book of the *Periphyseon*, *Alumnus* remarks: *Nihil enim uisibillum rerum corporaliumque est, ut arbitror, quod non incorporale quid et intelligibile significet* 'There is nothing among visible and corporeal things, I think, that does not signify something incorporeal and intelligible' (*PP* V 866A; *southam*: 10.228–30). Thus, in Eriugena's view, every visible thing has a higher meaning. This meaning, however, is not fixed. Rather, there always exists an unlimited number of interpretations, and therefore meanings, all of which are equally valid (as long as they are in accord with the Faith):

*Infinitus siquidem conditor sanctae scripturae in mentibus prophetarum spiritus sanctus infinitos in ea constituit intellectus, ideoque nullius expositoris sensus sensum alterius aufert* (*PP* III 690B–C; ed. Sheldon-Williams 1968–95: vol. 3, 188.22–5)

[For the Holy Spirit Who is the infinite founder of Holy Scripture established in the minds of prophets infinite meanings, and therefore no commentator's interpretation displaces another's (trans. Sheldon-Williams 1968–95: vol. 3, 189; translation lightly modified)].

In this, Eriugena appears to follow Augustine who, in a passage alluded to in the introduction to this chapter, similarly encouraged readers of the Bible to seek their own interpretations because multiplicity is built into the biblical text by the Holy Spirit who guided the pens of human writers:

*Quid mihi obest, cum diuersa in his uerbis intellegi possint, quae tamen uera sint? Quid, inquam, mihi obest, si aliud ego sensero, quam sensit alius eum sensisse, qui scripsit? [...] Dum ergo quisque conatur id sentire in scripturis sanctis, quod in eis sensit ille qui scripsit, quid mali est, si hoc sentiat, quod tu, lux omnium ueridicarum mentium, ostendis uerum esse, etiamsi non hoc sensit ille, quem legit, cum et ille uerum nec tamen hoc senserit?* (Aug. *Conf.* XII.xviii.27; *CCSL* 27: 229.8–230.18).

[So what difficulty is it for me when these words [of Genesis] can be interpreted in various ways, provided only that the interpretations are true? What difficulty is it for me, I say, if I understand the text in a way different from someone else, who understands the scriptural author in another sense? [...] As long as each interpreter is endeavouring to find in the holy scriptures

the meaning of the author who wrote it, what evil is it if an exegesis he gives is shown to be true by you, light of all sincere souls, even if the author whom he is reading did not have that idea and, though he had grasped a truth, had not discerned that seen by the interpreter? (trans. Chadwick 1991: 259–60)].

Both Augustine's and Eriugena's statements thus closely embody the comparison of medieval exegetical method to post-modern reading practices where 'there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*' (Barthes 1977: 145). The key difference is, however, that the indeterminacy of meaning in Christian hermeneutics is limited by the ultimate divine cause of all language – God: all possible meanings, even those not intended by human writers, are foreseen and intended by the divine one (Sturges 1991: 6–8).

While the number of interpretations for any given biblical passage is potentially limitless, Eriugena's exegetical paradigm is very simple and only consists of two levels. Eriugena often stresses the importance of this twofold approach to which Werner Beierwalters (1994) gave the name *duplex theoria*. It combines literal meaning which refers to the temporal world and a higher sense which points to its divine cause:

*Duplexque de creatura dabitur intellectus: unus quidem considerat aeternitatem ipsius in diuina cognitione in qua omnia uere et substantialiter permanent, alter temporalem conditionem ipsius ueluti postmodum in se ipsa (PP III 677A; ed. Sheldon-Williams 1968–81: vol. 3, 158.12–16).*

['Creature' can be understood in two ways, the one relating to its eternity in the Divine Knowledge, in which all things truly and substantially abide, the other to its temporal establishment which was, as it were, subsequent in itself (trans. Sheldon-Williams 1968–81: vol. 3, 159)].

Eriugena's interest in twofold interpretation may be, to some degree, influenced by Dionysian negative theology. To resolve the dialectic tension between cataphatic and apophatic epistemology, Eriugena arrives at the conclusion that just as there are no signifiers on the literal level that can be applied to divine essence, so there are unlimited opportunities to speak about it through metaphor:

*Quid tibi uiderer his argumentationibus machinari nisi ut intelligas quemadmodum significatiua rerum uocabula siue substantiarum sint siue accidentium [siue essentiarum] translatiue, non autem proprie, ita etiam significatiua naturalium seu non naturalium naturae conditae motuum uerba de natura conditricis translatiue, non autem proprie, posse praedicari? (PP I 512B–C; ed. Sheldon-Williams 1968–81: vol. 1, 196.4–9).*

[What do you think I intend by these arguments except that you should understand that as the nouns which denote the things (of created nature), whether substances or accidents [or essences], can be predicated of the Creative Nature metaphorically but not properly, so also the verbs that denote the motions of created nature, whether natural or not natural, can be predicated of it metaphorically but not properly? (trans. Sheldon-Williams 1968–81: vol. 1, 197)].

The idea that words can support a much heavier weight of figurative meaning than of literal finds further acknowledgement in a collection of exegetical material known as *Catechesis celtica*. As its title hints, it is firmly situated within an Irish milieu, although its dating is problematic. Broadly speaking, its various parts could have been written before the early-tenth century which could potentially make it contemporary with Eriugena himself.<sup>265</sup> In a commentary on John 14:1–2, the anonymous exegete, much like Eriugena and Augustine, acknowledges the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the Bible and suggests, in a Neoplatonic fashion, that earthly things may serve as signs of heavenly realities in such a way that profound insights may be concealed in very short expressions:

*Scripturae sanctae eloquium multiforme et multiplex est in sensibus. Inde quidam dixit: Celestia terrenis comparat, ut quod incomprehensibilis magnitudo uetat intelligi, per notissimas similitudines pos<s>it aduertit. In scripturae enim uerbis serendis mira potentia est, ut subito nobis immensa atque incomprehensibilia II<sup>bus</sup> uel III<sup>bus</sup> sermonibus explicentur. [...] et una sillaba ineffabilem dei naturam demonstrat, ut est: QUI EST ME MISIT; aliquando et una littera deum indicat, ut est: EGO SUM A ET Ω, INITIUM ET FINIS, DICIT DOMINUS. Ita hoc testimonium si diligenter intueatur, multos uerosque continet sensus (Cat. Celt. VI; ed. Wilmart 1933: 66.11–20).*

[The diction of Holy Scripture is multiform and multiplex in meanings. For this reason, someone said: heavenly things compare to earthly ones, so that what incomprehensible greatness forbids to be understood can be called to attention through the widely known likenesses. For in the interwoven words of Scripture there is wonderful power, so that immense and incomprehensible [things] may be suddenly explained to us in two or three words. [...] Even one syllable demonstrates the ineffable nature of God, as in: ‘The one who is sent me’. Sometimes even one letter denotes God, as in: “I am *alpha* and *omega*, beginning and end,” said the Lord’. Therefore, if this evidence is carefully considered it contains multiple and true meanings].

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<sup>265</sup> As Robert McNally noted, the collection is difficult to date precisely due to its composite nature, but the *terminus ante quem* is provided by the dating of the only manuscript that preserves it: Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Reg. Lat. 49 produced in the late-ninth – early-tenth century (McNally 1973: 178–9). On the Irish features of *Catechesis Celtica*, see Grosjean (1936); Ó Laoghaire (1987); McNamara (1990; 1994); Rittmueller (2015).

Thus, even though divine insights are generally out of the reach of human intellect, ‘immense and incomprehensible’ things can sometimes be expressed ‘in two or three words’. Even a syllable or a single letter can become deeply meaningful symbols of the divine – something which has been discussed at length in Chapter 2. It is due to the simple mechanism of allegory that linguistic signs, no matter how big or small, become capable of storing meanings which are otherwise unavailable to them and incomprehensible to the human mind. As if through a wormhole, they can pierce semantic space and arrive at distant frontiers where human intellect meets that of God.

From the foregoing, we can conclude that a common exegetical mode was twofold, with one meaning relating the word to a thing in the world – primary signification – and another, higher meaning which connects the thing and the word to something beyond themselves – transferred or secondary signification. The meaningful historical reference coexists with a sublime spiritual sense. The former is more objective, often it is a given; the latter is more dependent on the reader’s individual cognition and divine guidance.

### ***Double Perspective: Theory of Exegesis and Secular Hermeneutics***

Eriugena’s idea of infinite interpretations has already laid the groundwork for a reader-centred understanding of meaning. This section further examines approaches to the role of the reader in the process of meaning-making. When an exegete examines a text, he or she does not just opt for one perspective or another but, ideally, is able to perceive both the literal and spiritual sense. This idea is best expressed by the anonymous author of *Liber de ordine creaturarum* in a different iteration of the multi-level exegetical schema:

*Scriptura enim sacra tripartita ratione intellegitur; cuius primus intelligendi modus est, cum tantummodo secundum litteram sine ulla figurali intentione cognoscitur, ut sanctus Hieronimus dicit: ‘Actus apostolorum nudam quidem mihi uidentur sonare historiam’ (cf. Jerome, Epist. LIII.9; CSEL 54: 463.4); secundus modus est, cum secundum figuralem intellegentiam absque aliquo rerum gestarum respectu inuestigatur, ut prima et extrema pars Ezechielis, et Cantica Cantorum, et Euangelii quarundam parabularum expositio, quae aliud loquuntur, aliud agunt; tertius modus est cum, salua historicarum rerum narratione, mistica ratione intellegitur, sicut arca Noe, et tabernaculum et templum storialiter facta sunt, et intellectualiter ecclesiae misteria per haec designantur (DOC X.6–7; ed. Díaz y Díaz 1972: 158.47–160.58).*

[For Scripture can be understood in three ways: the first of these modes of understanding is when something is known only according to the letter,

without any figural meaning, as the blessed Jerome says: ‘The Acts of the Apostles seem to me a purely historical account’. The second way is when something is understood according to figurative meaning without any regard for the things that happened, as in the first and last part of Ezechiel and in the Song of Songs, and in the exposition of some parables of the Gospel, which say one thing and mean another. The third way is when, while respecting the account of historical events, a mystical meaning should be understood. Thus the building of Noah’s Ark, of the tabernacle, and of the temple were historical events, and they are understood to designate the mysteries of the Church (trans. Smyth 2011: 192–3)].

This account may not appear a significant departure from the twofold model at first but its importance lies in the idea that a combination of historical and spiritual interpretation constitutes a separate type of understanding where the two levels interact and enhance each other. This schema is not entirely original. Structurally, it is modelled on a similar threefold model proposed by Isidore (Isid. *Diff.* II.154–5; *PL* 83: 94C–95A), but our author introduces a few alterations. Aside from using different examples to illustrate each type of interpretation, he changes the order of levels: instead of Isidore’s sequence of literal, mixed and spiritual meaning, the author of *DOC* places the combined historical and mystical sense at the end of his list. Doing so creates an impression of an ascending hierarchy, where the simultaneous co-existence of meanings and the ability to recognise them are the pinnacle of scriptural exegesis.

In order for a person to perceive these two semantic levels at the same time, it is necessary for them to be able to see not only with the eyes of the body but with the eyes of the mind as well. Apostle Paul, the originator of many an exegetical trope, appealed to the *ocula cordis* ‘eyes of the heart’ when he addressed the Ephesians: *illuminatos oculos cordis vestri ut sciatis quae sit spes vocationis eius* ‘[I pray for you] so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you’ (Eph. 1:18). The idea of inner vision dedicated to contemplating incorporeal ideas found wide application in patristic literature, with one of its most influential proponents being Augustine (e.g. Aug. *De Gen. ad litt.* XII.6; *CSEL* 28: 386–7; cf. Miles 1983; O’Daly 1987: 204–7). A slightly different approach to the topic was offered by Gregory the Great who attributed the gift of inner vision specifically to biblical prophets as they were blessed with the ability to see *corporalia* ‘corporeal things’ and *sensus spiritalia* ‘spiritual meanings’ at the same time (*simul utraque uideant*; Greg. *Hom. in Ezech.* I.ii.2; *CCSL* 142: 17.24–30). The trope is thus not uncommon among Latin Fathers.

Among Irish authors, Virgilius Maro Grammaticus tackles the same idea in his own inimitable style. Instead of discussing the dichotomy of physical and spiritual sight, he lexicalises the distinction by assigning different verbs to refer to each: '*uido*' *ad mentis oculos referendum*, '*uideo*' *ad carnales* '*vido* refers to the eyes of the mind, *video* to the physical eyes' (Virg. *Epit.* VIII.20–1; trans. Law 1995: 18). Virgilius invents the verb *vidare* to take over the incorporeal meaning of the existing verb *videre*. The newly coined word finds practical application when Virgilius discusses the similarity between morphological families among words and familial relationships between people. This parallel is not something physically observable but it can be perceived with intellectual sight: *Vidantur autem mihi nominum et uerborum adfinitates humanae genealogiae similitudinem habere* 'Affinities between nouns and verbs seem (*uidantur*) to me to have a similarity to human genealogy' (Virg. *Epit.* V.331–3).<sup>266</sup> Indeed, this comparison is metaphorical/allegorical in nature.

Virgilius' word-building exercise implicitly serves another purpose: it demonstrates that 'double vision' is not exclusively reserved for reading Christian texts or comprehending Christian ideas. Virgilius applies it to grammatical concepts. Besides, the dichotomy between the literal and the figurative dimension also found legitimate use for reading non-biblical or explicitly pagan texts, where allegory was sometimes perceived to be the only applicable or 'ethical' interpretation from a Christian point of view (Ohly 2005: 30–1; Irvine 1994: 155–60; Wolff 2008: 60–1). Examples of Christianity's appropriation of authoritative pagan texts through allegory include Virgil's 'messianic' fourth eclogue (cf. Courcelle 1957), Fulgentius' moral interpretation of the 'Aeneid' (cf. Wolff 2008) or Augustine's allegorisation of his own conversion through Virgil's epic (cf. Bennett 1988).

When it comes to vernacular literature, Irish ecclesiastics seem to have been equally at home with adding a second, allegorical level of meaning to native tales while still acknowledging their historical veracity. The remainder of this section will focus on the way in which the idea of two-level signification found use in Irish vernacular narratives and how it can be seen as both constituting a meta-commentary on

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<sup>266</sup> Further examples of Virgilius' use of *vidare* are discussed by Law (1988: 128). Elsewhere she also observed that Virgilius has a general tendency to differentiate between the corporeal and incorporeal in his metalinguistic vocabulary, for instance, in his use of *fonum* and *verbum* to refer to word as a formal and semantic entity respectively (Law 1995: 18–19).

Christian reading practices and representing a secular epistemological model associated with poetic learning. As sources for this case-study, I propose to use texts centred around the characters of Mongán mac Fíachnai and Finn mac Cumail.

Mongán mac Fíachnai (d. 625) was a historical prince of Dál nAraidi who became a prolific literary character. A group of eighth-century texts, which were a part of the now lost *Cin Dromma Snechtai* (=CDS) manuscript, consistently portrays him as an extremely powerful figure, though not in the sense of military or political prowess.<sup>267</sup> Mongán's power comes from his poetic ability and apparent connections to the Otherworld. At the same time, the texts display subtle but unmistakable Christian and Christological allusions which create a discursive dynamic between secular and ecclesiastical modes of knowledge. Mongán's otherworldly perspective can be viewed as a metatext which, to a Christian reader, illustrates the familiar methodology of biblical exegesis. The emphasis on Mongán's poetic abilities reveals that the workings of poetic inspiration are not at odds with but, in fact, mirror the exegetical method, with its interplay between history and higher sense. To describe this twofold view of the world I introduce the term 'double perspective', which is somewhat reminiscent of *duplex theoria* in Eriugenian scholarship (cf. p. 224 above). While Eriugena's *duplex theoria* and the 'double perspective' of vernacular narratives may not be directly related, they both represent a universal intellectual paradigm of ontological dualism which not only pertains to textual practices but also offers a view of the world through a hermeneutic lens.

We start with a rather enigmatic text called *Immacallam Choluim Chille 7 ind Óclaig oc Carraic Eolairg* 'The Colloquy of Colum Cille and the Youth at Carn Eolairg'.<sup>268</sup> As the title suggests, the tale is a conversation between St Columba and a mysterious youth. It quickly becomes evident that the youth, whom the manuscript compilers

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<sup>267</sup> It is understood that CDS was compiled in the eighth century or copied from an eighth-century exemplar, presumably in the monastery of Druimm Snechtai or Bangor (Carey 1995). For a brief overview of relevant scholarship, see White (2006: 35–7). Argument for the Bangor provenance is in Mac Cana (1972: 105–6) and Stifter (2017: 24–6). An alternative dating to the tenth century was proposed by Mac Mathúna (1985: 421–69), although it has been criticised (cf. Breatnach 1988; McCone 2000: 43–7; White 2006: 36–7).

<sup>268</sup> John Carey (1995: 82–3) argued that the *Immacallam* was not originally a part of the Mongán tradition but was artificially pulled into its orbit by means of a short addition to the title: *as-berat alaili bad é Mongán mac Fiachnai* 'some say he was Mongán mac Fiachna' (*Immacallam* 1–2; references here and further are to line numbers in Carey's (2002: 60–1) edition and translation). Regardless, the connection to Mongán appears to be a deliberate decision on the part of the compiler(s) and justifies treating the text as a part of the Mongán canon.

identified as Mongán, is a supernatural being whose knowledge is superior even to that of Colum Cille. The holy man, himself a trained poet with a gift of prophecy, takes on the role of a student to Mongán's sage.<sup>269</sup> Columba's holiness and poetic credentials bridge the gap between ecclesiastical learning and *senchas* to give him the spiritual insight required to receive Mongán's unspeakable mysteries (cf. Nagy 1988: 369–70; Johnston 2015: 421). Moreover, Colum Cille's eagerness to learn from the otherworldly youth confirms the legitimacy of Mongán's knowledge within a Christian worldview.

I would like to propose that the *Immacallam* and other Mongán-centred texts lend themselves to a metatextual reading in which narrative dichotomies reflect the ontological and epistemological binaries of the allegorical method. Elva Johnston has prepared the ground for such an argument by suggesting that the youth's descriptions of the otherworldly realms invite a layered interpretation along the lines of biblical exegesis with its fourfold sense: 'the historical, allegorical, typological and anagogical' (Johnston 2015: 425). While such a fourfold scheme does not seem to fully map onto the text of the *Immacallam*, I do agree that there are certain prompts in the text that dispose the readers to consider at least a twofold signification. The main interplay is between a combination of the historical/literal meaning and mystical or spiritual sense which encompasses allegory and anagogy. On the narrative level it is reflected in the swift verbal (and mental) traversal back and forth between past and present, between this world and the Otherworld that is made possible by the youth's transcendent understanding of the world. On the metatextual level, it is a commentary on, and an example of, the practice of reading non-biblical texts with a Christian mindset: the world of the *Immacallam* is a text which Columba, and medieval Christian scholars who produced and read the *Immacallam*, are alike in wishing to understand; Mongán's ability to see the hidden parts of that world which belong to history or to a higher reality, shows the exegetical method at work.

The conversation between Columba and the young Mongán is portrayed as taking place on the shore of Lough Foyle in the north of Ireland. When Columba enquires

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<sup>269</sup> Columba was ascribed the authorship of several Latin hymns, including *Altus prosator* (cf. n. 75; Clancy and Márkus 1995: 39–40, 69–70, 81–2; Carey 1998: 29; Stevenson 1999: 364–5). Regarding his prophetic gift, it is the subject of the entire first book of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*. Joseph Nagy (1997: 147–8, 167) also noted that in Middle Irish tradition Columba was viewed as being well versed in the techniques of *filidecht* and possessed 'solid credentials as a poet'.



about the lough's history, the youth tells him about the times long ago, when the lough used to be solid ground. Mongán constructs a tangible link between the past and the present by recounting his former incarnations. It seems that for him different timelines are running parallel on a metahistorical plane: one when the lough was a flowery meadow and Mongán himself was a stag and a wolf, another one when it became a lake and he became a salmon and a seal. The stories of the past finally coalesce with the present when Mongán is reborn as a human. Historically, these events must lie far apart but within the narrative they acquire a certain unity through Mongán's incarnations, and emerge as a typologically determined historical parallel reminiscent of the double historical sense of Irish exegetical tradition.

Next, Columba wonders what lies under the sea, and Mongán tells him about an otherworldly realm hidden underwater. In modern scholarship the Otherworld is often interpreted as a Christian earthly paradise with its pre-fall bliss (e.g. Carney 1955: 281–7; Mac Cana 1972: 123; 1976: 95–9; Carey 1987; McCone 1990: 80–2). There is, therefore, solid groundwork to view the Otherworld as a part of Irish ecclesiastical paradigm. Considered metatextually, the mystery of this ethereal Otherworld, coupled with its inaccessibility to regular sense-perception (an underwater environment is generally not very accommodating to humans), makes for a good representation of *sensus* or *síans* – the higher sense, the incorporeal meaning intelligible to the mind. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Columba chooses precisely this moment to lead the youth aside, away from the monks' ears, to ask him about *rún nemdae 7 talmandae* 'the heavenly and earthly mysteries' (*Immacallam* 23–4). The phrasing may remind one of the 'Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter' and its definition of *síans* as referring *fri Críst, frisin n-eclais talmandai ocus nemdai* 'to Christ, to the earthly and heavenly church' (OIT 319–20). It appears that Columba's interruption of the dialogue right when Mongán starts describing the Otherworld pinpoints the moment when the conversation transitions from history to allegory.

The analogy between *Immacallam*'s imagery and the categories of exegesis, while it does not equate the two, is pointing towards a connection that is in accord with intellectual sensibilities of the period. Moreover, it provides a certain logical structure and epistemological purpose to the narrative, which is otherwise quite enigmatic. Lastly, this perspective is not exclusive to the *Immacallam*. It is also

applicable to *Immram Brain*, which may suggest that the proposed metatextual reading was something of a programmatic element in these texts.

*Immram Brain* is another eighth-century *CDS* text connected to Mongán and to the *Immacallam*.<sup>270</sup> However, it features Mongán only indirectly: his birth is prophesied but he does not appear in the tale as a character. The prophecy is delivered by Manannán mac Lir, Mongán's divine father. Manannán's verses in the *Immram* relating Mongán's birth fit well with the account given in *Compert Mongáin* 'The conception of Mongán', in that in both texts Mongán's mother begets the child by Manannán, while Fíachnae, Mongán's 'human father', accepts him as his son. Mongán's divine and human descent makes the parallel with Christ fairly transparent, even if its purpose is less so.<sup>271</sup> It is, moreover, reinforced by the deliberate juxtaposition within the poem of the birth of Christ and the birth of Mongán (*IB* 48–51).

The theological reading of Manannán's verses can be further enhanced by considering the metatext. Like Mongán's description of historical and supernatural worlds in the *Immacallam*, *Immram Brain* also prompts the audience to explore a two-level interpretation. After a dramatic appearance – *conacci a dochum in fer isin charput íarsin muir* '[Bran] saw a man in a chariot coming towards him over the sea' (*IB* 32) – Manannán starts reciting the following verses:

*Cáine amre lasin m-Bran  
ina churchán tar muir nglan;  
os mé im' charput di chéin,  
is mag scothach immaréid.*

*A n-as muir glan  
don nóí broinig itá Bran,  
is mag meld co n-immut scoth  
dam-sa a carput dá roth.*

*Atchí Bran  
lín tond tibri tar muir nglan:*

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<sup>270</sup> See Carey (1995: 91) where he suggested, following Carney's dating (1976: 180–1 n. 19, 192), that the *Immacallam*, being an earlier, seventh-century text, influenced *Immram Brain* and the Mongán tales. However, he has since hinted that the *Immacallam* and *Immram Brain* might be contemporary eighth-century compositions. See Carey (2002: 53, 56), White (2006: 46). On the intertextual links between the two texts, see Carney (1976: 184); Krivoshekova (2021: 13). In addition, like in the *Immacallam*, the Mongán of *Immram Brain* is introduced as the interpreter of mysteries: *adfíi rúna* 'he will make known secrets' (*IB* 52).

<sup>271</sup> Carney (1955: 282–90) regarded the entire text of *Immram Brain* a sustained Christian allegory whereas Mac Cana (1972: 123–5) maintained that Christian interpretation should be limited to the verse portions. The Christological parallels are also noted by McCone (1990: 80–2) and Williams (2016: 65–8).

*atchíu cadéin i Maig Mon  
scotha cennderga cen on.*

*Taitnet gabra lir i sam  
sella roisc rosíri Bran,  
bruindit scotha srúaim de mil,  
i crích Manannáin maic Lir.*

*Lí na fairgge foratái,  
geldod mora immerái,  
rasert bude ocus glass,  
is talam, nad écomrass.*

[Bran deems it a marvellous beauty  
In his coracle across the clear sea;  
While to me in my chariot from afar,  
It is a flowery plain on which he rides about.

What is a clear sea  
For the prowed skiff in which Bran is,  
That is a happy plain with profusion of flowers  
To me from the chariot of two wheels.

Bran sees  
Many smiling waves across the clear sea;  
I myself see in Mag Mon  
Red-headed flowers without fault.

Sea-horses glisten in summer –  
The prospect which Bran can range over;  
Flowers pour forth a stream of honey  
In the land of Manannan son of Ler.

The sheen of the sea on which you are,  
The white hue of the sea on which you row about:  
Yellow and azure are spread out,  
It is solid land (*IB 33–7*).<sup>272</sup>

These stanzas offer a continuous interplay of two perspectives: what Bran’s human eye sees as the sea, to Manannán is a flowery plain. The dichotomy between the two landscapes may be understood as a metatextual representation of the different interpretative planes of a narrative. Manannán’s superior vision plays the role of *sensus* to Bran’s *historia*. Bran’s inability to see what Manannán sees indicates that he does not have access to the realm of higher meanings.

The hierarchy of perspectives and meanings that emerges from Manannán’s verses, then, is similar to Mongán’s speeches in the *Immacallam*: a historical plane is juxtaposed with a mystical meaning which is hidden from plain sight by the curtain

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<sup>272</sup> The edited text and translation are modified based on the considerations which I have provided elsewhere (Krivoshchekova 2021: 12 n. 38).

of the Otherworld. Penetrating through it requires a certain spiritual competence. I call this motif running through the *Immram* and the *Immacallam* 'double perspective' – a narrative device whereby two realities are unfolding at the same time and can be accessed simultaneously by a supernatural character. It is hardly a coincidence that this ability belongs to Manannán and Mongán: like father, like son.

Importantly, the double perspective device appears to, in a way, break the fourth wall by reflecting on the different levels of interpretation available to a scholar, be it an ecclesiastic or a layman. Reading is a work of peeling back layers of meaning. There is a physical reference tied to history, but the exact same words can also conceal a whole other world of meanings which is only revealed to a reader with the necessary knowledge and spiritual insight to access it. This perspective allows us to see Bran's and Manannán's outlooks as two stages of cognition, both of which are available to a suitably trained person. The character who best represents such a person is Mongán whose mixed nature, human and divine, allows him to operate within both mindsets.

There are further examples from Irish literature which use allegory in a way that transcends the level of text and transforms into a meta-commentary on scholarly textual practices. One such testimony is the tenth-century tale *Airec Menman Uraird maic Coise* 'The Strategem of Urard mac Coise'. It tells the story of the poet Urard mac Coise who convinces the king of Tara to make a judgement in his favour by narrating a tale which is essentially a thinly veiled allegory of the injustice done to Urard himself. Rather than teaching a moral lesson to the king, the metatextual discourse of *Airec Menman*, so Erich Poppe (1999c: 47) argued, 'legitimizes an allegorical – or at least a non-literal or non-historical – understanding of the events narrated'. The allegory here masquerades as an alternative historical meaning while still maintaining the typological pattern of prefiguration and fulfilment in that the tale, as a heightened repetition of history, brings a firm resolution to the ambiguity of the historical situation. Urard's 'strategem' thus offers a witty tableau of the exegetical discourse of prefiguration.

Another recurring motif in our texts is the allegorisation of otherworldly landscape. This type of allegoresis in an undiluted form can be found in the Latin poem *Mentis in excessu* 'In ecstasy of mind', thought to have been composed by a bishop of Dublin named Patrick (d. 1084). The only surviving copy of the poem is accompanied by

extensive glosses drawing out an allegorical reading – glosses which, as Elizabeth Boyle (2016: 25) suggested, were an integral part of the text and meant to be transmitted with it. The poem describes the author’s mental journey *mentis in excessu lati loca ruris amena* ‘in ecstasy of mind through pleasant places in a wide countryside’ (ed. and trans. Gwynn 1955: 84.5). Already in this opening line the glossator reveals that ‘in ecstasy of mind’ means *in cogitatione secundum allegoriam* ‘in thought according to allegory’ while ‘the countryside’ represents Scripture. There is a detailed description of a walled city glossed as *ecclesia* (ed. Gwynn 1955: 90.116, 91 n. 116). An important passage reveals the poem’s interest in double meaning: the city’s inhabitants get their nourishment from fruits (*poma*) whose rind is *historia*, while the fruit itself is *sensus spiritualis*, spiritual sense (ed. Gwynn 1955: 90.113, 91 n. 112) – a familiar formula indeed. The poem ends with the conclusion that all these *spectacula mentis* ‘sights of mind’ are an elaborate allegory for contemplating incorporeal things (ed. Gwynn 1955: 100 n. 253–4). Bishop Patrick’s poem is an illuminating display of the allegorical mindset at work in narratives set in non-biblical environments. As Boyle (2016: 24) pointed out, ‘any cosmological truth-value which [such texts] might be deemed by their authors to possess is not necessarily (or not only) to be found on the literal level’. A text that is not overtly Christian on the surface reveals, through an exegete’s careful work, a rich Christian signification which emerges with full clarity from the metatext of the glosses, or indeed which can be decoded by a reader well-versed in the relevant literary tropes. This centring on the role of the reader is another feature in which medieval hermeneutics is reminiscent of postmodernist theories of discourse. Returning once again to Barthes, he pointed out that whenever the words of a text play with double meanings, ‘there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader’ (Barthes 1977: 148). It is thus the metatext that justifies the semantic structure of the text.

Unlike the *Immacallam* and *Immram Brain*, the four core Mongán tales do not appear to display any explicitly allegorical (or explicitly Christian) tendencies. Remarkably, however, all of them have a special interest in poetry. The epistemological implications of this are not dissimilar to what we have already observed through the exegetical reading of other texts: poetic inspiration connects physical reality with the realm of transcendent knowledge. Therefore, it can be argued that exegetical and

poetic modes of knowledge essentially constitute a unified epistemological paradigm.

Let us briefly recount the role of poetry in the four early tales. In the *Compert*, Mongán composed a quatrain of verse for his mother when he left her to find his birth father Manannán. In *Scél asa-mberar combad hé Find mac Cumail Mongán* ‘A story from which it is inferred that Mongán was Find mac Cumail’, he entered and won an argument with a *fili*; it was also revealed that Mongán is, in some mysterious way, Finn mac Cumail. In *Scél Mongáin* ‘The story of Mongán’, Mongán met a student poet and sent him on an errand to the Otherworld. Finally, in *Tuait baile Mongáin* ‘The cause of Mongán’s frenzy’, he recited his adventures in a state of ecstasy while – again – on a visit to the Otherworld.<sup>273</sup> We should also not forget that Manannán’s speech in *Immram Brain* is set in verse.

I discussed the four Mongán tales in more detail elsewhere (Krivoshchekova 2021: 22–5). For the purposes of the present argument, the avenue that is worth investigating further is the revelation in *Scél asa-mberar* that Mongán was Finn mac Cumail, which brings to mind the reembodiments he is said to have had in the *Immacallam* and the *Immram Brain* (cf. *IB* 53–4). This is also one of the earliest mentions of Finn in literature. In later sources, poetic training emerged as a stable part of Finn’s own mythos. It is tempting to hypothesise that Mongán’s and Finn’s poetic connections underlie their association in *Scél asa-mberar*.

Several early texts firmly associate Finn with the poetic technique known as *imbas forosnai* ‘the encircling knowledge which illuminates’. The concept is well-documented and regularly occurs in legal texts concerned with the poetic hierarchy, such as *Bretha Nemed*, *Uraicecht na Ríar* or the Introduction to *Senchas Már* where it is listed among the qualifications of a *fili* (cf. Carey 1997: 42–7). The exact nature of *imbas forosnai* is more clearly revealed in narrative literature and involves certain divinatory or prophetic abilities (cf. Chadwick 1935). Finn is said to acquire or possess this ability in three early tales: ‘Finn and the man in the Tree’, *Tuait fagbála in fessa do Finn 7 marbad Cúlduib* ‘How Finn obtained knowledge and the slaying of Cúldub’ and *Scéla Mošauluim 7 Maic Con 7 Luigdech* ‘The story of Mošaulum, Mac Con and Lugaid’.

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<sup>273</sup> All four tales are edited and translated by Nora White (2006: 71–83).

The first tale, 'Finn and the Man in the Tree' (mid- to late-eighth century) is a part of an early commentary on *Senchas Már*.<sup>274</sup> The Finn story glosses the term *imbas forosnai* and consists of two separate episodes. In the first one, Finn chases a certain Cúldub, a supernatural being and a thief, to a *síd*. Just as he is about to enter, a woman of the *síd* shuts the door in front of him and his finger gets caught in the doorpost. Finn puts his injured finger into his mouth to soothe the pain and when he takes it out, 'the *imbas* illumines him' (*fortnosmen an imbas*) as he recites a rhetoric in obscure language (ed. and trans. Meyer 1904: 346–7). Thus the otherworldly source of *imbas forosnai* is established – it descends upon Finn after his brief tactile contact with the *síd*. The second episode has Finn use his divinatory abilities to reveal the identity of the mysterious man in the tree, who turns out to be his former servant Derg Corra. The illuminating *imbas* allows Finn to see beyond the physical appearances into the hidden meaning of things. Besides, the second episode of the tale also functions within a Christian matrix: as Kaarina Hollo (2012: 54–7) demonstrated, it can be read as an allegory of the Crucifixion and the Eucharist. She argued that the eponymous man in the tree represents Christ on the cross administering communion (consisting of a nut, an apple and water) to the representatives of *tria genera animalium*: a creature of the earth (deer), a creature of the air (bird) and a creature of water (fish). The two thematic strands of the tale confirm that poetic clairvoyance and exegetical allegoresis are complementary modes of knowledge. If the former is bestowed on famous heroes and supernatural beings, the latter allows every trained reader to attain the same heightened level of understanding.

The tale *Tuait fagbála in fessa do Finn 7 marbad Cúlduib* 'How Finn obtained knowledge and the slaying of Cúldub' is a version of the Cúldub episode from the previous text. The two texts are closely connected and belong to the earliest stratum of Finn stories dating from the eighth century, which makes them contemporary with the Mongán material.<sup>275</sup> In *Marbad Cúlduib* too, after having his thumb jammed in the door to the *síd*, he gains his *fis* 'knowledge' as well as the ability to hear and understand the *síd*-folk. He then recites another cryptic incantation (ed. Hull 1941:

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<sup>274</sup> See Hollo (2012: 50). The language of the tale displays Old Irish features (Breatnach 1990: 139–40). The text is discussed more broadly in Murray (2017: 79–82).

<sup>275</sup> Kuno Meyer (1910: xix) dated the tale to the ninth century while Vernam Hull (1941: 322–3) proposed a mid-eighth-century date. Kevin Murray (2017: 74) likewise suggested that it and 'Finn and the Man in the Tree' can both be dated to the eighth century. For a brief discussion of the text and the poetic motif in early Finn tales, see Murray (2017: 77–9, 142–3).

330.21–31). The curious detail in *Marbad Cúlduib* is the focus on otherworldly speech and the exceptional circumstances in which Finn learns to understand it. This happens seemingly by chance, and even though he is an unwanted presence in the *síd*, his brief contact with it lifts the veil from his eyes, as it were. Once exposed to the existence of a higher reality, his mind opens to this secret realm and to the language in which it expresses itself. Finn's newly found ability to comprehend both the physical reality and a higher, unseen world is another incarnation of the double perspective motif.

The last tale, *Scéla Mošauluim 7 Maic Con 7 Luigdech* was dated by Kuno Meyer (1910: xxi) to the ninth century, although Máirín O'Daly (1975: 18; cf. Murray 2017: 89) suggested a date ca. 700 based on archaic linguistic features. Here Finn appears only briefly to warn Lugaid Mac Con about the person sent to kill him and, after the murder is committed, to track down the culprit. The approach of the assassin as well as his later whereabouts are revealed to Finn through the incantations of *imbas forosnai* which, as Nora Chadwick (1935: 115) noted, enabled him to see what was invisible to physical sight. The divinatory power of *imbas forosnai* in all three stories seems to be associated with obscure incantations – *retoiric* or *roscad*.<sup>276</sup> Manipulating language to arrive at hidden meanings is not limited to poetry but is a significant trait of Irish learned tradition as a whole, as we have seen in the previous chapters.<sup>277</sup> Here, as in Christian exegesis, linguistic concerns specifically underlie the search for the most profound knowledge.

To sum up thus far, the early Finn stories present him as the model example of *imbas forosnai*, a technique usually ascribed to the *filid*. It enables him to perceive the world on two different levels: its physical, historical aspect as well as the higher reality of the Otherworld which is the source of his superior knowledge and divinatory abilities. A profound link to poetry and spiritual insight therefore appears to be a focal feature of both Finn and Mongán which is to say, in the context of *Scél asa-mberar*, of Mongán's reincarnating essence.

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<sup>276</sup> On *roscad* and *retoiric*, the varieties of unrhymed accentual verse which use intentionally obscure language, see Carney (1955: 299–303), Murphy (1961: 2–7), Mac Cana (1966), Hull (1967), Breatnach (1991), Corthals (1996).

<sup>277</sup> E.g. etymological techniques discussed in Chapter 4 (pp. 149–54) or Virgilius' *scinderatio fonorum* addressed in Chapter 3 (pp. 119–23).



These texts make it clear that, within a culture dominated by an ecclesiastical worldview, poetic modes of knowledge secured their rightful place in the intellectual landscape of early medieval Ireland.<sup>278</sup> There is a testimony to the fusion of the two paradigms in another eighth-century text known as ‘The Caldron of Poesy’.<sup>279</sup> This cryptic composition is an extended metaphor for mental activity where different states of cognition are represented as cauldrons to be filled with different kinds of knowledge. According to Liam Breatnach (1981: 51), the author of the text aimed to reconcile the views of the secular and ecclesiastical learned classes on the sources of wisdom, and they did so by suggesting that the ability for learning may come both from the soul (the ecclesiastical view) and from the body, i.e. can be inherited (the secular attitude). Here the otherworldly *imb*as represents the highest degree of poetic mastery and is regarded as a distinct form of joy and inspiration, even if it is ultimately subordinate to the divine grace (cf. *Caldron* 11–12; ed. and trans. Breatnach 1981: 66–9). Continuing this reconciliatory line of thought, *imb*as *forosnai* can be compared to the divine illumination that the apostles received at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–11). Earlier in this chapter, we have seen that the Pentecostal miracle was an object of Irish exegetes’ attention (pp. 215–22) and, indeed, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the extraordinary character of the apostles’ xenolalia are somewhat analogous to the supernatural inspiration of the poets.<sup>280</sup> In a similar vein, in his discussion of St Columba’s prophetic power Thomas Charles-Edwards (2000: 193) concluded that Adomnán presents the saint’s prophecies as ‘an effectively Christian account’ of *imb*as *forosnai*, ‘no longer learned [...] from the teacher of the *filidecht* but conferred by the grace of God’. Given Mongán’s own poetic links and apparent omniscience, it is possible that he also possessed something akin to the supernatural *imb*as. This closes the circle started with the *Immacallam* and suggests that Mongán and Colum Cille’s conversation is centred around otherworldly, yet divinely sanctioned, knowledge of the physical and spiritual world.

This excursus into narrative literature has revealed how different aspects of Irish intellectual culture converge on each other in more and less explicit ways: Christian

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<sup>278</sup> On the relationship between poetical and clerical grades, see Breatnach (1987: 81–9); Johnston (2013: 20–1).

<sup>279</sup> Like other texts of poetic subject-matter, ‘The Caldron of Poesy’ has ties to the poetico-legal school of *Bretha Nemed* (Breatnach 1981: 52; 2005: 105).

<sup>280</sup> I thank Dr Elizabeth Boyle for pointing out this parallel. The miracle of Pentecost is discussed at length in Chapter 7 (pp. 253–7).

Latinity and exegesis are not that far removed from the divinely inspired *imbas* to which St Columba himself was no stranger and which distinguished a well-trained poet like Finn or Mongán. The exegetical method and the art of poetry share a view of the world which presupposes and seeks a two-level signification. Knowledge of physical reality is fundamental and available to everyone. But right beside it, there also exists a world which is unseen to an untrained eye, or rather, an untrained mind. It is the world of deeper insight and higher meaning, access to which is restricted. It can be gained only through mastering the arts of discourse to a degree which transcends ordinary language and is keyed to divine grace: mystical interpretation taught by the Bible and poetic inspiration.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter started with the idea that medieval exegesis can be, in some ways, compared to postmodernist approaches to textual criticism, namely surrendering the idea of a fixed, pre-ordained meaning in favour of a reader-centred model that allows for a multiplicity of interpretations. It has been established in the first section of the chapter that the foundation of biblical hermeneutics is the mechanism of meaning transference which underlies such figures of speech as metaphor and allegory. It is through such a transference that multi-level exegesis comes into existence. Separating figurative interpretations from the literal also requires an understanding of meaning that leans towards the Aristotelian view, in which meaning is closely connected to individual cognition. This is how the audience becomes the driving force behind meaning-creation.

In the second section we considered some of the most prominent exegetical models used by Irish scholars. Among them are two fourfold schemas. One of them is commonly found in Irish Psalter exegesis which comprises two historical senses, a syncretic *síans* and a moral sense. Here, it has been argued that the presence of a double historical meaning does not render the entirety of Irish exegetical tradition historical. Moreover, the second historical sense functions using transferred meaning in the form of typology or prophecy which generates distinct semantic levels. In a brief examination of the term *síans* I suggested that its ability to signify various forms of non-literal interpretation broadly arises from the quasi-Aristotelian ideas about meaning. At the same time, it has been demonstrated that

Irish scholiasts were similarly comfortable in using the standard fourfold model for drawing out multiple meanings from the same piece of text.

I have also argued that a common exegetical strategy was to revert to a simple dichotomy of *historia* and *sensus* where the latter encompassed all forms of non-literal signification. The typological comparison between the first and the second Pentecost in the Book of Armagh symbolically imagines the two historical events as textual acts intended to be 'read' when the author describes them, using exegetical terminology, as festivals of letter/history and mystery/spiritual sense. A brief examination of Eriugena's twofold exegetical model contributed the important idea that metaphor opens possibilities for infinite interpretations that can differ from reader to reader and still remain valid.

The argument of the final section continued to build on the twofold model. Here, however, it has been suggested that the ability to perceive both history and higher sense simultaneously constitutes a separate type of interpretative capacity, as is explicitly stated in *Liber de ordine creaturarum*. An important metaphorical device that characterises such a capacity is the concept of inner vision that a skilled reader utilises alongside physical sight. To illustrate this idea, I offered a case-study of a group of vernacular narrative texts which employ a technique which I termed 'double perspective' – a literary device whereby two realities are unfolding at the same time, one sensible and one of a subtler nature which can only be accessed supernaturally. I have also argued that such accounts can be read metatextually as a representation of scholarly work of encoding and decoding levels of meaning in a text. The interplay between the in-narrative motifs and techniques of narrative creation outlines a consistent, and distinctly Irish, hermeneutic theory where exegetical and poetic modes of thought coexist to reveal layers of signification beyond text and reality.

## Chapter 7: The Language of God and the Language of Thought

### *Ockham, Fodor and the Language of Thought*

At last, this exploration of the relationship between language and thought in Irish tradition has reached its final stage where the two merge into a heightened form of discourse, free from the limitations imposed by physical form. The Milan glossator aptly expressed this incredibly complex idea in a lapidary statement: *.i. airis imradud álabradsidi in menman* 'i.e. for the speech of the mind is thought' (Ml. 138a3). But this is only a starting point.

To develop a fully-fledged, systematic theory of mental language proved to be a difficult task, and it was finally managed in the early fourteenth-century by William Ockham who is commonly considered to be the first to consistently describe cognitive processes in terms of linguistic and logical categories (cf. Hochschild 2015: 29). So great is Ockham's authority in this area that his name is often mentioned alongside the modern figurehead of the concept of mental language – Jerry Fodor, the originator of the so-called 'Language of Thought Hypothesis' (LOTH).<sup>281</sup> Ockham's and Fodor's approaches agree in their fundamental premises, both postulating the existence of a universal, expressively complete, syntactically structured medium of thought which every person possesses prior to acquiring any natural language and whose elements – mental words – serve as prototypes for the words that are spoken (Normore 2009: 294). Claude Panaccio (2017: 7) proposed a concise but effective definition of mental language: it is 'the idea of an abstract and discursive thought, independent of languages but constituted by signs and, like languages, equipped with a syntax and a finely articulated compositional semantics'. Thus, important criteria of mental language which we should keep in mind going forward are its universal character, its compositional structure comprised of individual 'words' and its primacy over natural languages.

This chapter does not aim to suggest that Irish views on intellectual speech somehow anticipate Ockham's (or Fodor's) detailed and systematic insights. Its scope is less presumptuous: it is to examine approaches to mental language in Irish sources since the idea clearly had some sway over scholars' minds. And there are

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<sup>281</sup> For an exposition of LOTH, see Fodor (1975). For comparisons of Ockham's and Fodor's theories, highlighting both their similarities and differences, see Normore (1991: 67; 2009); Schierbaum (2014: 231–50); Read (2015: 12–13); Panaccio (2017: 219–26).

good reasons to search for traces of ideas on the language of thought in Irish material since, as previous chapters have established, Irish language-philosophical theories display significant influences from the Aristotelian and Augustinian traditions, both of which served as ultimate sources for late medieval theories of mental language (Panaccio 2017: 3). In Chapter 5, we discussed Aristotelian theory of meaning through Boethius' mediation (pp. 164–6). It has been noted that, according to this theory, there are three kinds of speech: written, spoken and mental. Just as the first two are construed of nouns and verbs, so mental speech has its own, conceptual syntactic units that correspond to their linguistic tokens. These mental concepts are, unlike words in natural languages, universal for all. Boethius refers to this type of speech as *oratio animi atque intellectus* 'the speech of the mind and of thought' (PH II 24.24). We have also discovered a similar idea in the writings of Eriugena and Sedulius Scottus both of whom speak of *conceptiones mentis* as incorporeal meanings which correspond to specific linguistic items. This development undoubtedly belongs to the same strand of thought that later gave rise to the theories expounded by Ockham and, later, John Buridan.

In order not to tread the same ground, this chapter will take a different approach and examine the idea of an intellectual language as it recurs throughout the framework of biblical history. There are four major historical points that defined Christian philosophy of language: Creation, Babel, Pentecost and Doomsday. These points also determine the structure of this chapter. It starts with an exploration of the concept of the language of God, centring around God's utterance at Creation as the blueprint for all other types of intellectual discourse. The second section focuses on the events at the Tower of Babel and Pentecost as a typological pair. While the division of languages at Babel destroyed the unity of mind that existed among the speakers of the primeval language, the grace of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost not only sanctified linguistic diversity but also, in some interpretations, opened the minds of the hearers to a form of discourse that transcends human languages. The final section of the chapter will address intellectual modes of communication at the eschaton described in two Middle Irish texts: the angelic language of *In tenga bithnua* and the telepathic communication of the righteous in heaven of *Scéla na esérgi*. Overall, the chapter will demonstrate that there is significant, if disparate, evidence for a theory of mental language in Irish sources which is centred around the key linguistic events in salvation history.

### ***The Language of God: Intellectual Language par excellence***

The text of the Bible is unfortunately vague in identifying or defining the primeval language(s). What is clear from the opening chapters of Genesis, is that every created thing was spoken into existence by God, viz. *dixit Deus* (Gen. 1), and that there was mutual linguistic understanding between God and the first people in paradise (Gen. 2:16–17; 2:19–20; 3:9–19). These seemingly tangential references to linguistic communication puzzled many an exegete and generated a great variety of interpretations. A passing statement in the apocryphal Book of Jubilees equates the language of God with the language of Adam and identifies both as Hebrew (Jub. 12:25–7; trans. VanderKam 1989: 73–4). This position, however, is extremely rare in Latin literature (Denecker 2017: 85–8).<sup>282</sup> The language of God is usually regarded separately from the primeval language of humankind.

In the matters of the divine language, many Latin authors subscribe to the idea articulated by Ambrose and Augustine, namely that the language spoken by God is entirely beyond human comprehension and is purely incorporeal. In *De genesi ad litteram libri duodecim* Augustine pokes holes in the idea that the words spoken by God at Creation were of corporeal nature: what language was he speaking? to whom was it addressed? (Aug. *De Gen. ad litt.* I.ii.5; *CSEL* 28: 5–6). Instead, he proposes: *an id, quod intellegitur in sono uocis, cum dicitur: 'fiat lux', non autem ipse corporeus sonus, hoc bene intellegitur esse uox dei?* 'Is the voice of God best understood as being the intelligible meaning of the audible utterance, "Let light be made", and not the audible utterance itself? (Aug. *De Gen. ad litt.* I.ii.6; *CSEL* 28 6.11–13; trans. Hill 2002: 170). Similarly, Ambrose clarifies: *dixit deus non ut per uocis organa quidam sonus sermonis exiret [...], sed ut uoluntatis suae cognitionem proderet operationis effectu* 'God did not speak as one would utter a sound through the vocal organs [...]. His purpose was to reveal the knowledge of His will by the effects of His work' (Ambr. *Exameron* I.ix.33; *CSEL* 32: 36.3–7; trans. Savage 1961: 39). Thus both Fathers agree that the divine language does not have a physical form but is pure meaning – *quod intellegitur* 'what is understood' – which, moreover, has the power to modify reality and bring things into existence.

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<sup>282</sup> However, overall Hebrew enjoyed a high status among Patristic authors due to it often being imagined as the primordial language of the humankind. See Resnick (1990: 53–60); Rubin (1998: 317–22); Hilhorst (2007: 780–2); Gallagher (2012: 131–7); Eskhult (2014: 327–35).

This idea receives significant elaboration in Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob* where he addresses the multiple instances in the Bible where God is said to speak to various human characters. Gregory suggests that there are two ways in which God can speak to people: through himself or through angels. Whenever the communicative situation involves physical attributes, such as a (disembodied) voice, images, significant objects or elemental forces, in those cases God enlists angels as his intermediaries (Greg. *Moralia* XXVIII.i.3–9; *CCSL* 143B: 1397–1401; although angels can also inspire divine revelations from within the human mind). For now, however, we are more interested in the first mode of divine speech which Gregory describes as follows:

*Sed cum per semetipsum loquitur, sola nobis ui internae inspirationis aperitur. Cum per semetipsum loquitur, de uerbo eius sine uerbis ac syllabis cor docetur, quia uirtus eius in intima quadam subleuatione cognoscitur. [...] Incorporeum lumen est quod et interiora repleat, et repleta exterius circumscribat. Sine strepitu sermo est, qui et auditum aperit, et habere sonitum nescit. [...] Dei locutio ad nos intrinsecus facta uidetur, potius quam auditur, quia dum semetipsam sine mora sermonis insinuat, repentina luce nostrae ignorantiae tenebras illustrat (*Moralia* XVIII.i.2; *CCSL* 143B: 1396.22–1397.58).*

[But when he speaks through himself, he is revealed to us solely through the power of inner inspiration. When he speaks through himself, the heart is instructed in his word without words or syllables. Because his virtue is known in a certain inmost elevation. [...] It is incorporeal light, which both replenishes the interior [parts] and circumscribes them when they are filled. It is a speech without noise, which both opens the ears and is unknowing of having a sound. [...] God's utterance addressed to us inwardly is seen rather than heard, because, while he produces it without the hindrance of speech, he illuminates the darkness of our ignorance with a sudden light].

Here, Gregory reiterates the idea of the incorporeal, noiseless and wordless divine communication, while still persistently using language-related vocabulary to describe it. This passage, in fact, presents a curious mixture of metaphors: God's speech is simultaneously a linguistic phenomenon, expressed in *sermones* and *locutiones*, and an object of sight, an *incorporeum lumen* 'incorporeal light'. The latter reintroduces the already familiar concept of inner vision (cf. pp. 227–8) which, as we will see, plays an equally important role in the scholarly conceptions of mental activity, alongside the notion of thought as language. Gregory also clarifies why the sense of sight is an appropriate analogy for how the divine language is comprehended: it is because by sight we are able to apprehend things instantly, grasping the object all at once, rather than in a temporal, sequential manner, as it happens with the sense of hearing (Greg. *Moralia* XXVIII.i.2; *CCSL* 143B: 1397.52–5).

This instantaneous, total comprehension is another key feature that distinguishes intellectual speech from regular human language.<sup>283</sup>

There is thus a solid foundation in Patristic tradition for thinking about the language of God. These ideas, however, seem not to have found particular resonance with Irish authors. So for example, *Saltair na Rann* ‘The Psalter of Verses’, which specifically deals with Creation and God’s communication with Adam in paradise, follows the example of the Bible in that it simply has God freely addressing humans and angels without specifying the manner of his speech.<sup>284</sup> Neither do we hear anything about the words spoken by God at Creation when the topic is handled by the author of *Liber de ordine creaturarum*. There are, to my knowledge, two Irish accounts of Creation that acknowledge the intellectual nature of the language of God. One of them is found in the Middle Irish text *In tenga bithnua* ‘The Ever-new Tongue’ which, according to John Carey (2009: 71–92; 1999: 52–3) was originally composed in the ninth century and revised in the tenth. This work is an ingenious vernacular account of the entire creation, framed as a revelation delivered by apostle Philip (or rather, by his disembodied voice) to an assembly of Hebrew sages on Mount Zion.<sup>285</sup> We will return to the nature of Philip’s speech at the end of this chapter (pp. 260–6 below). For now, we should consider some of the details of his account. At an early point in this cosmological tableau, the informant touches upon the very first step of Creation in Gen. 1:3: *Dixitque Deus: Fiat lux* ‘And God said, “Let there be light”’. Remarkably, the author entirely forgoes mentioning the linguistic aspect of this act and instead describes it in purely intellectual terms as a ‘thought’ – *imrádud*:

*Im-roraid imradud. Nicon rabai tosach dond imradhad-sin. Im-roraid ni: bad shairiu ara n-aiciste a chumhachta 7 a mhiadamla ba diasnese, nad bai i nnacha reduibh ailib ce nud-bai-sium fadesin. Talmaidiu didiu asennad inna imrati do-gene soilsi.*

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<sup>283</sup> On similar advantages of the ‘inner vision’ metaphor in Augustine, see Ando (1994: 74–7).

<sup>284</sup> *Saltair na Rann* is an epic biblical poem which recounts the events of the sacred history from Creation to Doomsday, composed ca. 1000 (McNamara 1975: 14–16). Cantos I–III are dedicated to creation, IV–X give an extended account of the story of Adam and Eve. In the latter, God is a frequent interlocutor to Adam and Eve, e.g.: *Rī ro rāde aithesc nglan / fri Eua ocus fri Ádam* ‘The king who uttered a pure speech to Eve and Adam’ (SR VII.1081–2; ed. and trans. Greene and Kelly 1976: 26–7). See also SR VII.1104; IX.1405; IX.1413–14; X.1441–2; X.1468.

<sup>285</sup> While *In tenga bithnua* is quite an unparalleled text for its time, it likely draws on an existing, non-Irish work. Whitley Stokes (1905: 96) suggested that *In tenga bithnua* is based on a lost Latin apocryphon ‘Apocalypse of Philip’. Montague James (1918: 12) and John Carey (2009: 61–5) proposed that the text may have been influenced by the Greek ‘Acts of Philip’. In addition, Carey (2009: 58–61) suggested another possible source – a lost cosmological work of Coptic origin which may have combined Christian doctrine with Platonic, Gnostic and Hermetic elements.



[He thought a thought. That thought had no beginning. He thought something: that it would be nobler that his power and glory be seen – that which was inexpressible, that which existed in no other things though he existed himself. Suddenly then, after those thoughts, he made light (*TB* 18–19)].

This interpretation of the event internalises the Augustinian approach to the language of God as a spiritual form of communication and, in doing so, takes the liberty to omit the linguistic metaphor and describe this act as what it is ‘literally’ – a thought.<sup>286</sup> That this ‘thought’ is God’s utterance to himself may be an implicit presupposition in this passage, born out of the interplay with the biblical text where it is explicitly presented as such (in any case, as Augustine noted, there is no one to whom it might have been addressed otherwise).

Another example, even more recognisably Augustinian, occurs in the *Bibelwerk*. Speaking of God’s utterance at Creation, the author notes that it is called a *dictio* ‘word’ *non quod lingua diceretur, non quod auris audiuit, sed per Verbum sibi coaeternum, id est Christum* ‘not because it was expressed in language, not because an ear had heard [it], but [it was said] through the word coeternal with Himself, that is through Christ’ (BW 90.7–9; *CCSM* 173: 41). The author here makes an expected connection to John 1:1: *In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum* ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’. The parallel between the utterance at Creation and the divine *logos* was observed already by Philo of Alexandria (cf. Rubin 1998: 308). Augustine too, in the passage from *De genesi ad litteram* cited earlier, noted that God’s creative speech belongs to the nature of his Word because it is through the Word that all things were made (John 1:3). He adds: *aeternum est quod ait deus: ‘fiat lux’, quia uerbum dei, deus apud deum, filius unicus dei. Patri coaeternus est* ‘God’s saying “Let light be made” is something eternal, because the Word of God, God with God, the only Son of God, is co-eternal with the Father’ (Aug. *De Gen. ad litt.* I.ii.6; *CSEL* 28: 6.18–20; trans. Hill 2002: 170). When thus identified with the second person of the Trinity, God’s word seemingly becomes even further removed in its ineffability from human languages. At the same time, however, as Joshua Hochschild (2015: 36) noted regarding Augustinian thought, this identification creates a foundation for a different analogy – the one ‘between the procession or expression of the Divine

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<sup>286</sup> Carey (2009: 65–6) likewise noted Augustinian roots of the idea of the ‘beginninglessness’ of divine thought and suggested that it was adopted into the Irish text from a supposed prototype.

*Logos* in God and the formation of a concept of “inner word” in the human intellect’. Indeed, the hierarchical chain leading from outer word to inner word (i.e. thought) to the Word of God provides solid conceptual grounding for a language-based view of cognition.

In the interest of further discussion, Augustine’s notion of ‘inner word’ merits a few comments. In *De trinitate*, he speaks frequently and fondly of certain *locutiones interiores, hoc est cogitationes* ‘inner speeches, that is, the thoughts’ and *uerbum quod in mente gerimus* ‘the word that we bear in our mind’ (Aug. *De trin.* XV.x.18–19; *CCSL* 50A: 485.58, 486.82–3; trans. McKenna 1963: 475–6). This inner word is the true bearer of meaning:

*Proinde uerbum quod foris sonat signum est uerbi quod intus lucet cui magis uerbi competit nomen. Nam illud quod profertur carnis ore uox uerbi est, uerbumque et ipsum dicitur propter illud a quo ut foris appareret assumptum est* (Aug. *De trin.* XV.xi.20; *CCSL* 50A: 486.1–487.4).

[Hence, the word which sounds without is a sign of the word that shines within, to which the name of word more properly belongs. For that which is produced by the mouth of the flesh is the sound of the word, and is itself also called the word, because that inner word assumed it in order that it might appear outwardly (trans. McKenna 1963: 476–7)].

Thus, the words of human languages are merely different incarnations of the inner word. This inner word *ad nullam pertinet linguam* ‘belongs to no language’ and is therefore universal in the Aristotelian sense (Aug. *De trin.* XV.x.19). Universality, as we remember, is one of the formal criteria that separates the true language of thought from simply thinking in a specific language. The distance from everything corporeal and transient is what brings the inner word closer to its prototype – the divine *logos*.

At the same time, Augustine provides his doctrine of the inner word with a more pragmatic functionality: within the scheme of human cognition, it acts as an instrument of memory. In order to recover and verbalise an existing piece of knowledge (*notum*), one needs to direct one’s thought towards it, whence an inner word that represents it will be generated in the mind: *Sed certe si ea [nota] dicere uelimus, nisi cogitata non possumus. nam etsi uerba non sonent, in corde suo dicit utique qui cogitat* ‘But, of course, if we wish to utter them [i.e. things that are known], we cannot do so except by thinking of them. For, even though no words are sounded, yet he who thinks certainly speaks them in his heart (Aug. *De trin.* XV.x.17; *CCSL* 50A:

483.15–484.17; trans. McKenna 1963: 473–4). The inner word of *De trinitate* as the driving force behind the faculties of memory and intellection can be compared to the concept of *dicibile* which Augustine introduced in *De dialectica*. As was established in Chapters 3 and 5 (pp. 92–4, 166–7), *dicibile* or ‘sayable’ is the meaningful content of a linguistic sign, abstracted from its form, i.e. it subsists in the mind prior to verbalisation. As Gerard O’Daly (1987: 141) observed, both the ‘inner word’ and the *dicibile* represent ‘a word-potential capable of being expressed’. Once it is matched to a phonological form, it turns into a *dictio*.<sup>287</sup> Thus, we once again encounter the idea of meaning as an abstract mental concept which lacks any formal linguistic markers and is not tied to a specific language. It appears, then, that Augustinian mental language consists of such incorporeal, form-less meanings as its constituents.

But back to Irish material. An interesting example, though not as elaborate as Augustine’s doctrine, of juxtaposing the language of God and the language of human thought occurs in the text which was introduced in Chapter 1 in the context of the discussion of *vox* – the anonymous grammatical treatise *Quae sunt quae* from ca. 700. The text presents evidence for both a corporeal and an incorporeal understanding of *vox*. Importantly, the incorporeal approach is supported with a passage which attests to the author’s (direct?) knowledge of Augustine’s *Confessiones* (pp. 30–2). In addition to the Augustinian notion of precedence of matter over form, the author also exemplifies the incorporeal *vox* through the speech of God:

*Prima vox spiritalis ‘fiat lux’, sine litteris et syllabis et reliquis partibus orationis. Prima corporalis per litteram et syllabam et reliqua, ‘ecce nunc os de ossibus meis’, et reliqua (QSQ 38; ed. Munzi 2004: 31).*

[The first spiritual *vox* [is] ‘Let there be light’, without letters, syllables and other parts of speech. The first corporeal [*vox* expressed] in letters, syllables etc.: ‘This is now bone of my bones’ etc].

Here the author juxtaposes the non-verbal, purely intellectual *vox* of God (Gen. 1:3) with the human *vox* of Adam (Gen. 2:23). This comparison is made possible due to the flexible understanding of *vox* as a conceptual entity, capable of both existing in the mind and being actualised in speech (although the choice of the term *vox* over *verbum* to describe divine speech is interesting since *vox* has more pronounced

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<sup>287</sup> In *De trinitate*, Augustine also emphasises that words of existing human languages can be mentally represented in thought but they are distinct from the true inner word which ‘belongs to no language’ (Aug. *De trin.* IX.x.15, XV.xi.20; *CCSL* 50: 306.6–11, *CCSL* 50A: 488.40–6; trans. McKenna 1963: 284, 478).

phonological than semantic connotations).<sup>288</sup> While it may seem at first that the distinction is precisely that – between God and man, – it is clarified a few lines later that the incorporeal *vox* is also a part of human language, alongside *voces* produced orally and in writing:

*Ubi imago vocis? Quando cogitatur in mente. Ubi vox viva? Quae sonat ex ore loquentis et aure audientis. Ubi vox mortua? Cum litteram post obitum auctoris sui proferunt [sic] (QSQ 38; ed. Munzi 2004: 31).*<sup>289</sup>

[Where [is it] the image of *vox*? When it is thought (*cogitatur*) in the mind. Where [is it] the living *vox*? That which sounds from the mouth of the speaker and to the ear of the listener. Where [is it] the dead *vox*? When it brings forth the letter after the death of its author].

The phrase *imago vocis* ‘the image of *vox*’ is intriguing: it implies that mental content which is to be represented in speech is reflective of the spoken utterance already at the stage prior to articulation. This may suggest that thought itself is here conceptualised as language-based. Given the proximity of this passage to the earlier statement regarding the *vox* of God, it may be assumed that among these three types of human *vox*, the one that ‘is thought in the mind’ (*cogitatur in mente*) is the closest reflection of the divine *vox*, although this analogy is not explicitly drawn out in the text. If this is the case, we may further speculate that such a view would in some way be influenced by Augustine’s idea of the inner word as an image of the divine *logos*. This suggestion depends on how familiar the author was with the Augustinian oeuvre outside of *Confessiones*. Moreover, the formal similarity to Boethius’ tripartite division of *oratio* ‘speech’ (viz. spoken, written and *quae coniungeretur in animo* ‘the one which is connected in the mind’ (*PH* II 30.3–5)) may be pointed out, although this parallel is most likely coincidental.

It is fitting to conclude this overview of the concept of divine language with an account that centres not on the first but on the second person of the Trinity, i.e. the Word himself. A hypothesis about how the voice of Christ will sound at Resurrection can be found in the Middle Irish eschatological sermon *Scéla na esérgi* ‘The Tidings

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<sup>288</sup> The theological significance of the relationship between *vox* and *verbum* is made evident in the first chapter of the Gospel of John where Christ is presented as *Verbum* ‘the Word’ and John the Baptist is the *vox clamantis in deserto* ‘voice of one crying out in the wilderness’ (John 1:1, 1:23).

<sup>289</sup> The distinction between the ‘living’ and ‘dead’ *vox* also occurs in the Berlin *De voce: Quae est uiua uox et quae mortua? Hoc autem exemplum est: uiua uox eo quod in aures discipuli ab auctoris ore transfusa; fortius sonat quam mortua, quia mortua est in scriptione* ‘What is the living *vox* and the dead [*vox*]? This is the example: the living *vox* [is called so] because it is poured into the disciple’s ears from the mouth of the author; it sounds stronger than the dead [*vox*] because the dead [*vox*] is in writing’ (Berlin, Diez. B Sant. 66, p. 344.25–7).

of Resurrection'.<sup>290</sup> According to its author, there are two ways in which the voice of Christ might be heard:

*Atchluinfet and sin na huli daini filet in-adnaicthib guth maic De. Combad guth corptha atberad Ísu sund do éstecht dona marbaib .i. guth ind árchaingil Michil doraga d'erfuacra na hesergi co coitchenn for in cinud ndóenda [...]. Nó is **guth nemchorpda** atbeir Ísu sund **d'estecht** dona marbaib .i. forcongra spirtalda 7 cumachta **diasneti** in Chomded nad chumaing nach nduil do imgabail (SE 82.2509–16).*

[Then all the men who are in graves will hear the voice of the Son of God. It may be a corporeal voice that Jesus would here utter to be heard by the dead, to wit, the voice of the archangel Michael who will come to proclaim the Resurrection generally to the human race [...]. Or it is an incorporeal voice that Jesus here utters to be heard by the dead, to wit, the spiritual command and the unspeakable power of the Lord, which no creature can avoid (trans. Stokes 1904b: 235, 237)].

Thus, we are presented with two options: Christ will speak either corporeally through archangel Michael or himself through a *guth nemchorpda* 'incorporeal voice'. Indeed, such a distinction is reminiscent of Gregory's account of divine speech in *Moralia*.<sup>291</sup> Although the description of the 'incorporeal voice' is very brief, there are a few important details to be noted. First, we once again encounter a term for 'voice' (*guth*) where one might otherwise expect to find 'word'. It appears, then, that the property of incorporeality was firmly ingrained in the understanding of *vox/guth* not only in grammatical but in exegetical discourse as well. Another important feature of *guth nemchorpda* is that it can be heard by the dead (*d'estecht dona marbaib* 'for the hearing by the dead') but, at the same time, conveys *cumachta diasneti* 'unspeakable power' (the adjective *díaisnéithe* 'unspeakable' derives from *aisnéis* 'act of speaking'). Indeed, all these indications point towards the same idea of divine speech which humans can perceive intellectually but not physically. This account of the speech of Christ thus mirrors at the end of times the linguistic motif of Creation.

### ***From Babel to Pentecost: Reuniting Thought and Language***

Just as is the case with the language of God, nowhere does the Bible specify the language spoken by Adam and his descendants before Babel. The standard point of

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<sup>290</sup> The text is approximately dated to the second half of the eleventh century (Kenney 1966: 738) and survives in one copy in the twelfth-century *Lebor na hUidre* (Dublin, RIA, MS 23 E 25).

<sup>291</sup> Alternatively, the passage could be in part drawing on 1 Thess. 4:16: *Quoniam ipse Dominus in iussu, et in voce archangeli et in tuba Dei descendet de caelo et mortui qui in Christo sunt resurgent primi* 'For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first'.

departure for interpreters is the statement in Gen. 11:1: *Erat autem terra labii unius et sermonum eorundem* ‘Now the whole earth had one language and the same words’.<sup>292</sup> According to the standard patristic view, this original language was Hebrew and its source was Adam’s naming of the animals in Gen. 2:19–20 (cf. n. 282). However, the unity of mankind symbolised by the unity of language was not long-lived, ending with the events that transpired at the Tower of Babel, as narrated in Gen. 11:1–9. With a single-minded intention, people resolved to build a tower that would reach up to heaven in order to celebrate their own name. Impressed but not compelled by this display of power, God confused their language in order to disrupt their communication, and thus the world became multilingual.

But there was another grim consequence to these events, at least as observed by the author of *Saltair na Rann*. The verses that relate the story of the Tower of Babel summarise the aftermath as follows:

*Rī ro dechraig claind Ádaim  
ar chēill, ar chruth, ar grádaib;  
nī háirem chlaen, cain in smacht,  
dā chenēl saer sechtmogat (SR XXIV.2773–6).*

[The King who separated the children of Adam  
in mind, in form, in ranks;  
it is not an inaccurate count, a fair ordinance –  
seventy-two noble races].<sup>293</sup>

Here we are presented with a brief sketch of the emergence of new linguistic communities. As a result of linguistic differentiation, people became divided *ar chruth* ‘in form’, perhaps pointing to the differences in appearance between different ethnic groups and their unique material cultures, and *ar grádaib* ‘in ranks’, with the creation of new social hierarchies. Together with these external consequences, the absence of a common language also created an intellectual barrier and separated

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<sup>292</sup> A contradicting statement is found in Gen. 10:5, although it is almost universally overlooked in the exegetical tradition. It describes the diffusion of the descendants of Noah after the Flood: *Ab his divisae sunt insulae gentium in regionibus suis, unusquisque secundum linguam et familias in nationibus suis* ‘From these the coastland peoples spread out into their territories, each with their own language, their families and their nations’ (translation modified). Regarding this obvious and highly problematic contradiction, Umberto Eco (1995: 9) noted: ‘Where it was not neglected entirely, Genesis 10 was reduced to a sort of footnote, a provincial episode recounting the diffusion of tribal dialects, not the multiplication of tongues’.

<sup>293</sup> The edition and translation of this stanza is taken from the unpublished notes by David Greene (2007) available online on the website of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. Apart from that, no full edition and translation yet exists (although, an older edition, without translation, by Stokes (1883) is available).

people *ar chéill* ‘in mind’. The term used here –*cíall* – is a familiar one indeed. This particular context allows both of its primary meanings to shine: if understood as ‘meaning’, it indicates that in a multilingual environment people could no longer match meanings to their forms for successful communication; understood as ‘mind’, it suggests that before Babel, people were united not only linguistically but also mentally. An intriguing implication of this latter interpretation is the idea that this mental unity was, perhaps, due to a natural relationship that existed in the Adamic language between words and their referents which left no opportunity for misunderstanding. Such an assumption could be reasonably based on Adam’s nomothetic activities in Gen. 2:19 where it is stated, somewhat ambiguously, *omne enim quod vocavit Adam animae viventis ipsum est nomen eius* ‘and whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name’. This passage lends itself to both a naturalist and a conventionalist reading. However, coupled with Adam naming Eve *virago* ‘woman’ *quoniam de viro sumpta est* ‘for out of Man (*vir*) this one was taken’ (Gen. 2:23) it becomes evident that the words of the primeval language were imagined to be etymologically true to their referents (Eco 1995: 7–8). If it is this forfeited naturalist perfection of the original language that the author of *Saltair na Rann* laments in the lines cited above, describing it as the loss of mental unity is a fitting way to emphasise the lack of harmony between things, thoughts and words in the post-Babelic world.

Indeed, the evaluation of the events at Babel in patristic and medieval exegesis is usually negative – the narrative was often used for moral instruction as a tableau of human pride. So, for example, according to one Augustinus, the Irish author of the mid-seventh-century treatise *De mirabilibus sacrae scripturae*, the Babel disaster occurred because *impia cunctorum mentibus et superba cogitatio subrepsit* ‘a wicked and arrogant thought crept into the minds of all’ (*DMSS IX; PL 35: 2160*).<sup>294</sup> The author of the *Bibelwerk* similarly summarises the Babel narrative and its typological counterpart, the Pentecost: *Pro superbia lingue confuse sunt. Cum deus homines noluit intrare caelestia, linguas diuisit; cum uero uoluit dominus homines eleuare ad se, in apostolis adunauit* ‘Languages were confused on account of pride. When God did not wish people to enter heaven, he divided the languages; however, when the Lord wished to raise people to himself, he united them in the apostles’ (*BW 276.5–*

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<sup>294</sup> I was not able to access the more recent edition by MacGinty (1971). On this text, see Esposito (1919), Grosjean (1955), MacGinty (1987), Bracken (1998), Löfstedt (1999), Willis (2016).

8; *CCCM* 173: 121). In this interpretation, the dispersal of languages is, on the one hand, deplored as punishment for transgression that suspended man's ability to communicate with the divine; on the other hand, however, the typological framing of Babel as a mirror-event to Pentecost makes it an inevitable and indispensable step in the history of Christianity that guarantees its future triumph of multilingual preaching.<sup>295</sup>

With Pentecost, the motif of linguistic diversity reaches its culmination and becomes sanctified as a part of salvation history. The story of the apostles miraculously starting to speak all languages of the world through the gift of the Holy Spirit is related in the Acts of the Apostles 2:1–12. This episode was commonly interpreted as a speaking miracle, that is, the agency was understood to remain with the apostles who were thought to truly speak a multitude of languages. However, there was another way to understand the biblical text, prompted by the ambiguity that arises from the use of the verb *audire* 'to hear' in two verses:

*Facta autem hac voce convenit multitudo et mente confusa est quoniam audiebat unusquisque lingua sua illos loquentes.*

[And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each (Acts 2:6)].

*Iudaei quoque et proselyti Cretes et Arabes audivimus loquentes eos nostris linguis magnalia Dei.*

[Both Jews and proselytes, Cretan and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power (Acts 2:11)].

Another way of reading these passages was most clearly articulated among early medieval scholars by Bede, following a homily by Gregory of Nazianzen in Rufinus' Latin translation (cf. Greg. Naz. *Orationes* IV.15; *CSEL* 46: 160.17–161.21). In his *Expositio Actuum apostolorum*, Bede ponders whether the miracle rather resided in the listeners' ability to understand the apostles' speech in each person's own native language:

*An in eo potius erat mirabile quod sermo eorum qui loquebantur qualibet lingua fuisset pronuntiatus unicuique audienti secundum suam linguam intellegebatur, ut uerbi gratia uno quocumque apostolo in ecclesia dicente [...] ipse sermo hanc in se uim haberet, ut, cum diuersarum gentium auditores essent, unusquisque secundum linguam suam illius unius sermonis qui ab eo*

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<sup>295</sup> On the appraisals of Babel and Pentecost in patristic literature, see Denecker (2017: 199–211); Major (2018: 59–72). On the prefiguration motif in medieval Irish approaches to Babel and Pentecost, see Boyle (2020: 120–1, 161–2).



*apostolo fuerat pronuntiatus susciperet auditum et caperet intellectum* (ed. Laistner 1983: 17.75–83).

[Or was the marvel rather the fact that the discourse of those who were speaking, in whatever language it may have been uttered, was understood by everyone of the hearers in his own language? So, for example, when any one of the apostles was talking in the assembly [...] that very discourse had within itself the power that, when there were hearers of diverse nations, each of them would perceive what they heard in terms of his own language and would grasp the meaning of that one and the same discourse which had been uttered by the apostle (trans. Martin 1989: 30)].

Bede's stance in this passage gives priority to the performative qualities and inspired nature of the apostles' speech and, in doing so, brings it closer to the intellectual language of God. Kees Dekker (2005: 353) compared this presentation of the event to Gregory the Great's ideas on the divine language which similarly inspires understanding in people's hearts through the Holy Spirit. In this line of thought, the emphasis is on the hearers' ability to 'grasp the meaning' (*intellectum capere*) internally to make sense of the external words that are not familiar to them. This position, however, did not find much support among Bede's contemporaries as he felt obligated to clarify in the *Retractatio* that he did not insist on this interpretation but merely provided an alternative option (ed. Laistner 1983: 110.42–111.70; trans. Martin 1989: 39).

Nevertheless, this unconventional view of Pentecost appears again in an eleventh-century Irish homily *De die Pentecostes* found in the fifteenth-century manuscript *Leabhar Breac*. Most of the homilies in *Leabhar Breac* are bilingual: original versions in Latin that draw on Hiberno-Latin exegetical tradition are supplemented with Middle Irish translations.<sup>296</sup> Below I provide passages from *De die Pentecostes* in both languages as they differ slightly:

*Talis elocutio dupliciter intelligitur: multi enim apostolos omnibus linguis locutos fuisse aestimant, alii uero eos hebraica lingua locutos fuisse arbitrantur, sed ita ab omnibus esse intellecta ea quae dicta sunt quasi singulis propria sua loquerentur* (ed. Atkinson 1887: 438).

[This expression can be understood in two ways: many consider the apostles to have spoken in all languages; others, however, suppose that they spoke in Hebrew, but everyone understood the things that were spoken in such a way as if their own [language] had been spoken to each].

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<sup>296</sup> For a general discussion of the *Leabhar Breac* homilies and an argument for Máel Ísu Ó Brolcháin (d. 1086) as the compiler/translator, see Mac Donncha (1976). Hiberno-Latin background of the Latin homilies is elucidated in Rittmueller (1982) and Miles (2014).

*O díb modaib etargnaiter in rath-sa na n-il-berla tucad do na hapstalaib: ar domuinet sochaide, na hapstail co n-id as cech berla ro-labairset; fairend aile imorro, is ed atberut, co n-id on berla Ebraide namá ro-labairset, 7 co n-id air-side do-thaitne aeb a mberla dílis do chach; araide is ed is móo démnigít in aúgtair, co n-id as cech berla ro-labairset (ed. Atkinson 1887: 194.5484–89).*

[This grace is interpreted in two ways: it brought many languages to the apostles, for many consider the apostles to have spoken every language; the other group, however, says that they only spoke in the Hebrew language and that it was on account of [the grace] that the semblance of their own languages became manifest to each. Nevertheless, more authors confirm this: that they spoke every language (my translation)].

Like Bede, the homilist is aware of the two existing interpretations of the miracle and, no doubt, ultimately draws on Gregory of Nazianzen, even if not directly. It cannot be ruled out that the author of the Latin homily relied on Bede as one of his sources. In that case, he could have also been aware of the unfavourable reaction that the alternative interpretation received. The homilist is careful not to disclose his own preference and instead makes it clear that the traditional interpretation is more common and authoritative.

At the same time, the differences between the Latin and the Irish versions indicate that the translator was somewhat more fascinated by the possibility that the miracle took place in the hearers' minds. Where the Latin text simply states that the apostles' words were 'understood' by everybody (*esse intellecta*), the translation emphasises how fluent the physical manifestation of the divinely inspired discourse is: it takes semblance (*oíb*) to any given language and reveals itself (*do-thaitne* 'which became manifest') through divine grace (*rath*). Thus the Hebrew words spoken by the apostles were miraculously transformed into words of other languages which the listeners could process as regular speech. Nevertheless, spoken language is relegated to the role of a passive conductor as the miracle centres the spiritual nature of the divine language which can address human minds directly. This interpretation also agrees with the observation made in the previous chapter regarding the parallels between *imbias forosnai* and the apostles' 'illumination' at Pentecost (p. 239). Indeed, if the Pentecostal miracle grants the apostles a double view of reality, so the audience could be similarly inspired by the Holy Spirit to perceive the event on two levels. On the historical/literal level they would still hear Hebrew being spoken, but on the level of *sensus* the meaning, which is universal and the same for all, would be apparent to them through divine grace.

Unfortunately, the homilist does not develop this intriguing idea further. However, based on Irish language-philosophical ideas discussed thus far, we may speculate that, while the miraculous properties of the apostles' preaching are ultimately inspired by God, the mechanism that ensures its comprehensibility on the side of human psychology may be some form of the language of thought. Just as linguistic diversity created at Babel is brought to intellectual unity at Pentecost, so linguistic variation can be understood to be united in the Peripatetically universal character of thought. When linguistic meaning is equated with thought (*intellectus*), such a semantically charged mental item becomes the conceptual content that unites words and utterances in different languages, so that, for instance, the words *liber* and 'book' ultimately refer to the same *intellectus* (cf. Read 2015: 19). Whether the events of Pentecost are interpreted as a speaking or a hearing miracle, it is this higher, internal form of language, which every person possesses regardless of their native tongue, that allows for the divine inspiration descended upon the apostles to be communicated truthfully, unimpeded by the imperfections of human language. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that the apostles or their audience would be hindered by the pitfalls and uncertainties of interlingual translation of the kind that, in Chapter 5, so disturbed the Milan glossator in his own studies which, as far as we know, were not so explicitly aided by divine inspiration as the apostles' preaching (cf. pp. 191–5).

The xenolalic miracle of Pentecost should be distinguished from another 'unnatural' linguistic phenomenon described in the New Testament, namely glossolalia, or 'speaking in tongues', which refers to a form of ecstatic speech in a language that is comprehensible neither to the speaker nor to the hearer (cf. Denecker 2017: 198). This is described in most detail in 1 Cor. 14, for example:

*Qui enim loquitur lingua, non hominibus loquitur sed Deo; nemo enim audit. Spiritu autem loquitur mysteria.*

[For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit (1 Cor. 14:2)].

*Nam si orem lingua, spiritus meus orat, mens autem mea sine fructu est. Quid ergo est? Orabo spiritu orabo et mente; psallam spiritu, psallam et mente.*

[For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive. What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also (1 Cor. 14:14–15)].

Pauline glossolalia still remains a difficult concept to grasp. It is an inspired discourse which is incomprehensible to human subjects and, as such, is ‘caught at a point between the total absence of signification and its full presence’ (Heller-Roazen 2002: 92). An argument has also been made that ‘speaking in tongues’ should be associated with Paul’s reference to speaking *linguis angelorum* ‘in the tongues of angels’ in 1 Cor. 13:1 (Poirer 2010: 47–59). This is an intriguing suggestion, and the concept of angelic language will become the centre of discussion in the next section. In the meantime, however, we may turn to the Würzburg glosses for their contribution to the topic of ‘speaking in tongues’. It appears that the glossator(s) understood glossolalia of 1 Corinthians to be essentially the same phenomenon as xenolalia of the Acts. So, the phrase *qui enim loquitur lingua* ‘anyone who speaks in a tongue’ (1 Cor. 14:2) is glossed with *.i. intíi labrathar ilbéltre* ‘i.e. he who speaks many languages’ (Wb. 12c19). The verses 1 Cor. 14:14–15 given above are clarified as follows:

(a) [gl. *sine fructu est*] *.i. ní-thucci momenme immurgu .i. quia non intellego quod loquor.*

[i.e. my mind, however, understands it not, i.e. because I do not understand what I utter’ (Wb. 12d11)].

(b) [gl. *mente*] *.i. cid asmaith disunt tra; ni anse sulbirigfer spiritu et mente .i. tucfa mo menme anas-bérat mo beiúil.*

[i.e. what then is good therefrom? Easy (to answer); I will speak well *spiritu et mente*, i.e. my mind will understand what my lips will utter’ (Wb. 12d12)].

In the hands of the glossator, the passage about glossolalia turns into a first-person account of what it means to suddenly, through divine intervention, start speaking in a language of which one does not have prior knowledge, be it human or angelic. Paul makes a distinction between praying *spiritu* ‘with the spirit’ and *mente* ‘with the mind’. It is the spirit that channels divine grace and gives one the ability to speak in tongues. This is done by overriding the person’s conscious mind, which remains unchanged and ignorant of this miraculously acquired linguistic knowledge. To solve this problem one is advised to pray with the mind as well as with the spirit, but it is not clear whether the contents of the two resulting discourses are identical to each other. In this regard, gloss (b) seems to hint at a certain parallelism between speaking with the spirit and with the mind (*spiritu et mente*). The mind is thus able to achieve an understanding of the inspired discourse uttered by the spirit. With this, we once again arrive at the idea of mental speech. Although it is not developed

any further in this context, certain implications can be drawn out. Indeed, in order to understand the message imparted to the human spirit by God, the mind must take over, speaking its own language – thought, – which, although imperfect, has a semblance to the divine language and is thus able, with proper guidance, to reach extraordinary insights. Thus, understanding the tongues hinges not on a perfect grasp of external linguistic structures but on the ability to engage one’s cognition on the level of abstract meaning.

### ***Intellectual Communication Beyond the Veil***

Following our excursus into the manifestations of the language of thought in the earthly city, we now turn to consider accounts of mental language spoken by the inhabitants of the heavenly city. Interestingly, our sources appear to be more confident in discussing the phenomenon of mental communication in connection to higher realities than to more mundane contexts. This fact further emphasises the association between human cognitive processes and their supposed divine prototypes. In this section, we will consider two examples which elevate human thought to the level of celestial forms of discourse: the angelic speech of *In tenga bithnua* and the telepathic communication of the righteous in heaven in *Scéla na esérgi*. It is worth noting that both texts belong to the Middle Irish, rather than the Old Irish period. They are thus representative of a rising interest in the concept of mental language which around this time gained new momentum in the writings of Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109), from where a line can be traced, through scholastic authors such as Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus, to the theory of William Ockham (cf. Panaccio 2017: 103–58). The themes raised in the two Middle Irish texts also anticipate some of the ideas explored by Ockham and his predecessors. As Calvin Normore (1991: 53) noted, Ockham’s concept of mental language is specifically ‘suited to be spoken by natural telepaths and is spoken by the angels’ due to its universal and transparent nature. Indeed, these are the two applications expounded in our texts. While we should not expect Irish scholars’ insights to perfectly anticipate the conclusions of the later medieval philosophers, it is nevertheless significant that they postulate similar problems.

## *The Language of Angels*

The questions of angelic speech (angeloglossy) were part and parcel of most discussions of the language of God.<sup>297</sup> Indeed, if God can communicate with people, he must also communicate with the other part of rational creation – angels. The differences between the human and the angelic nature dictate differences in their forms of communication. Here, two considerations are key, namely that angelic intellect is closer to God than that of humans and that angels are unencumbered by a physical body. Thus, Gregory the Great paints a picture of the way in which God converses with angels:

*Nam quia spiritali naturae ex corporea oppositione nihil obstat, loquitur Deus ad angelos sanctos eo ipso quo eorum cordibus occulta sua inuisibilia ostendat, ut quicquid agere debeant, in ipsa contemplatione ueritatis legant et uelut quaedam praecepta uocis sint ipsa gaudia contemplationis. Quasi enim audientibus dicitur quod uidentibus inspiratur* (Greg. *Moralia* II.vii.9; *CCSL* 143: 65.31–6).

[Since the body poses no obstacle to spiritual nature, God speaks to the holy angels by the very means of showing his unseen mysteries to their hearts so that whatever they ought to do, they might read it in this contemplation of truth, and these delights of contemplation might be like certain commands of the voice. For inspiration to those who see is like speaking to those who listen].

Gregory's view of angelic communication is thus similar to Augustine's concept of the inner word: both are imagined simultaneously as speech and sight. This means, on the one hand, that these elevated forms of discourse conform to the semantic, if not syntactic, structure of language while, on the other hand, enjoying the instantaneous nature of sight. When it is the angels' turn to address God, it is similarly done through a combination of an intellectual *vox* and contemplation: *Vox namque angelorum est in laude conditoris ipsa admiratio intimae contemplationis* 'For the voice of angels is in the praise of the creator, that wonder of inner contemplation' (Greg. *Moralia* II.vii.10; *CCSL* 143: 65.53–4). Gregory develops the linguistic metaphor by suggesting that the angelic voice *se quasi per distincta uerba explicat* 'unfolds itself, as it were, in distinct words' (*Moralia* II.vii.10; *CCSL* 143: 65.57–8). Gregory's angelic language, then, is a spiritual form of communication but, at the same time, has a shape that is akin to human speech (cf. Denecker 2017: 216).

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<sup>297</sup> For an overview of Patristic sources on the topic, see Denecker (2017: 214–16). For a more Hebrew-centred study of angelic language, see Poirier (2010).

Augustine too talks about the nature of God's communication with angels in *De civitate dei* where he likewise describes it as a fully intellectual type of discourse:

*Dei quippe sublimior [...] locutio [...], quae non habet sonum strepentem adque transeuntem, sed uim sempiternae manentem et temporaliter operantem. Hac loquitur angelis sanctis, nobis autem aliter longe positis. Quando autem etiam nos aliquid talis locutionis interioribus auribus capimus, angelis propinquamus (De civ. XVI.6; CCSL 48: 507.22–8).*

[God's speech, to be sure, is on a higher plane [...] his speaking has no sound, no transitory noise [...]. It is with this speech that he addresses the holy angels, whereas he speaks to us, who are situated far off, in a different way. And yet, when we also grasp something of this kind of speech with our inward ears, we come close to the angels (trans. Bettenson 1972: 659–60)].

This passage further reaffirms the idea of a divine *locutio* which can be perceived not externally but through introspection. Moreover, Augustine here optimistically suggests that human intellection is not too far removed from the angels' ability to understand God which suggests that all forms of mental speech that stem from a divine source are qualitatively equivalent to each other.

The idea that higher, intellectual forms of speech can be mutually comprehensible between humans and angels is advanced in the Irish *In tenga bithnua*. The first appearance of the angelic voice to the gathering of the Hebrew kings and bishops is appropriately dramatic. It is preceded by the sound of thunder and a bright *gríanbruth* 'sunburst' or 'solar glow' (TB 7). This setting is reminiscent of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost which was similarly accompanied by natural phenomena, including a *spiritus vehemens* 'violent wind' and *linguae ignis* 'tongues of fire' (Acts 2:2–3).<sup>298</sup> With the scene thus set, the author continues:

*Talmaidiu iar sein co clos ni; ar ro bhatar sella int sloigh oc frescse in delma, ar do-rumentar ba hairdhe mbrata. Co clos ni, in guth solus labrastar o berlu ainglecdha: HÆLI HABIA FELEBE FÆ NITEIA TEMNIBISSE SALIS SAL .i. 'Cluinid-si a scel-sa, a maccu doine; dom-roided-sa o Dhia dofar n-acalluimh'.*

[Suddenly thereafter something was heard; for the eyes of the host were **gazing upon the noise**, for they thought that it was a sign of the Judgement. Something was heard, **a bright voice** which spoke **in angelic language**: '*Hæli habia felebe fæ niteia temnibisse salis sal*'; that is, 'Listen to this tale, sons of men! I have been sent from God to speak to you' (TB 8)].

Already this initial passage gives us much food for thought. First, the phrase *oc frescse in delma* 'gazing upon the noise' catches the eye. This is, undoubtedly, a vestige of the double metaphor of speech and sight which is advanced so

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<sup>298</sup> This parallel was also observed by John Carey (1999: 61–2).

prominently by Augustine and Gregory, and it gives us an early indication that the words spoken by the *guth solus* 'bright voice' are not of an ordinary nature. John Carey (2009: 243) aptly characterised this account of visible sound as synesthetic, concluding: 'The transgression of the normal categories of perception effectively conveys the transcendental source of the revelation itself'. Indeed, the very next sentence reveals that this is nothing less than a *bérta ainglecda* 'angelic language'. We are then offered a sample of what this language looks and sounds like: a string of strange but entirely 'language-like' words, labelled 'gibberish' by Whitley Stokes (1905: 96), which is accompanied by a translation into Irish. There are thirteen such 'angelic' sentences throughout the text, all quite short, but their translations, sometimes in Irish and sometimes in Latin, often result in rather lengthy paragraphs disproportionate to the length of the original 'phrase'.<sup>299</sup> I shall return to this tangible form of the angelic language shortly.

Using Priscian's terminology, we can describe this angelic voice as *vox litterata* since it clearly lends itself to being rendered in writing. While this fact appears to somewhat detract from the supposedly supernatural character of angelic speech, the description of its acoustic qualities certainly reinforces its mystical image: it is, paradoxically, both as loud as a shout of an entire army and as quiet as a conversation between friends (*TB* 9). When it comes to divine languages, as we have seen, the emphasis is often on the complete lack of sound. *In tenga bithnua*, however, takes this idea to an opposite extreme and, in making the sound of angelic speech so absolute as to encompass the entire acoustic spectrum, comes back round to implying that it is above the very notion of sound.

In the next paragraph, the mysterious voice identifies itself as apostle Philip who is known to the household of heaven under the moniker 'Ever-New Tongue' on account of the fact that his tongue was cut out from his head nine times while he was preaching to the pagans during his lifetime (*TB* 10). This particular detail of Philip's biography appears to be unique to the Irish tradition: it does not figure in the known texts of the apocryphal 'Acts of Philip' but it does appear in the Middle Irish *Pais Pilip apstail* 'Passion of Philip' from the *Leabhar Breac* which is somewhat younger than *In tenga bithnua* (McNamara 1975: 113–15; Carey 2009: 254–5).<sup>300</sup> There is no

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<sup>299</sup> For an overview of the 'angelic' passages, see Carey (2009: 244).

<sup>300</sup> The relevant passage is as follows: *Atrachtsat tra dronga écraibdecha 7 na sacairt Iúdaide i n-again Pilip apstail, co n-id ed atbertsat, a thengaid do thescad. Do-rónta sámlaid; ar-ái ni lugati dogníd-sum*



doubt that this is precisely the reason why apostle Philip was chosen as the celestial emissary to the humans: only those who have mastered heavenly communication have the ability to speak without a tongue.

Having established the identity of the incorporeal speaker, the listeners wish to know more about the language itself:

*Ro raidsetar ecnaide na nEbraide: 'Finnamar uait cia berla no labraithear frind.' Ro raid-seom: 'Iss ed labra..[s].t aingil', ar se, '7 uile gradh nimhe a mbelra-sa no labraim-si dhuib-si. Mad mila mara 7 biastai 7 cethrai 7 eoin 7 nathraig 7 demnai atgenatar-sidhe; 7 iss ed a mbelra-sa labertait inna huile i mbrath.'*

[The wise men of the Hebrews said: 'Let us learn from you in what language it is that you speak to us.' He said: 'The language in which I speak to you is that in which the angels speak, and every rank of heaven. And sea-creatures and beasts and cattle and birds and serpents and demons understand it, and all will speak it at the Judgement' (TB 11)].

Here, the Ever-new Tongue reiterates that he speaks the language of angels and further clarifies that this language is shared between all inhabitants of heaven and that it will be spoken by all at the eschaton. Moreover, it is also comprehensible to other living creatures, including various fauna as well as demons.

It is important to note that, in one passage, it seems to be suggested that this celestial language is in fact Hebrew. After one of the cryptic 'angelic' passages, the author remarks: *Mall uile a thuiremh tresan Ebrai a n-aisniter ann* 'It would be tedious to recount in Hebrew everything which is related in that' (TB 16). This remark, as Stokes (1905: 96) suggested, may refer to the transcription of angelic speech, as if it were presented in an abridged form with an expanded Irish translation. External support for this option is provided by *Auraiccept na nÉces* where it is mentioned that Hebrew is the language of the people of heaven and will also be spoken by everyone after Doomsday (*Auraic*. 188–92).<sup>301</sup> Moreover, one of the manuscripts of the second

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*forcetul in popuil in ní-sin. Atbertsat in popul 7 na sacairt doridisi a thengaid do thescad; do-gníset tra, 7 ni ro-erchotig dó. Fo-secht tra ro-tescad tengaid in apstail leo, 7 ni ro-airis-sium oc forcetul fris-in ré-sin* 'Then arose the unbelieving crowds and the Jewish priests against Philip, and ordered his tongue to be cut out. This was done; but none the less did he go on teaching the people. They cut it out again, but that did him no hurt. Seven times was this done, yet he stopped not his teaching all that time' (ed. and trans. Atkinson 1887: 112.2547–53, 358). This account is somewhat unclear as to the number of times that Philip's tongue was cut out. It could either be read as seven times in total or the first two times could be counted separately and added to another seven, thus giving a total of nine. The latter reading brings this text closer to the tradition of *In tenga bithnua*.

<sup>301</sup> *Berla nEbraidi 'na tengtha robai isin domun ri araile cumhdach in tuir 7 is ed dno bhias iar mbrath 7 asberat araile co mbad eadh nobeth la muintir nimhe* 'The Hebrew language is the tongue that was in the world before any building of the Tower, and it is it too that will be after doomsday, and some say that it was it which the people of heaven had' (*Auraic*. 188–92). This idea goes against the

recension of *In tenga bithnua*, dating to the later Middle Irish period, explicitly identifies the angelic language as Hebrew.<sup>302</sup> The internal evidence of the oldest version, however, does not sustain this interpretation: in the passage cited above (*TB* 11), the wisest of the Hebrew people could not recognise the language. The remark, therefore, may refer to *In tenga bithnua* itself, perhaps imagined as a translation from a Hebrew original to lend it additional authority.

The angelic language is thus miraculously comprehensible to people who hear it for the first time, to say nothing of the animals. Such a characterisation appears to be drawing on the same idea that underlies the interpretation of Pentecost as a hearing miracle: the language of heaven is a purely intellectual phenomenon which manifests itself in such a way as to adapt to the hearers' cognitive abilities and to superficially resemble their form of communication.

A similar 'adaptive' interpretation was developed by several Latin authors regarding not the language of angels but the language of God. Among them are Hilary of Poitiers, Faustus of Riez and Isidore (cf. Denecker 2017: 91–2). In this view, the language of God, 'although not translatable into any known idiom, is still, through a special grace or dispensation, comprehensible to its hearer' (Eco 1995: 7). Isidore, for instance, notes in his *Etymologiae: In diversis quippe gentibus creditur quod eadem lingua illis Deus loquatur quam ipsi homines utuntur, ut ab eis intellegetur* 'As for the various language communities, it is rather believed that God speaks to them in the same language that the people use themselves, so that he may be understood by them' (*Etym.* IX.i.11; trans. Barney et al. 2006: 192).<sup>303</sup> Since the angelic language of *In tenga bithnua* is such that it makes itself comprehensible to different rungs of beings with vastly different intellectual capacities, it can likewise be conceived of in this way.

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mainstream of Latin tradition which rejected the claim that Hebrew would become the language of the eschaton (Resnick 1990: 57; Denecker 2017: 75–6).

<sup>302</sup> This is pointed out by Carey (2009: 256). Manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Fonds celtique no. 1 contains the following remark: *7 is é in bérla Eabraidhi fhoighenus dona hanmannaibh iar mbráth* 'and it is the Hebrew language which will serve the souls after the Judgement'. Carey also noted that this remark is absent from the three other manuscripts of this recension.

<sup>303</sup> Interestingly, however, Isidore dismisses the idea that angels have their own language. Regarding the phrase *linguae angelorum* in 1 Cor. 13:1, he says: *Vbi quaeritur qua lingua angeli loquantur; non quod angelorum aliquae linguae sint, sed hoc per exaggerationem dicitur* 'Here the question arises, with what tongue do angels speak? But Paul is saying this by way of exaggeration, not because there are tongues belonging to angels' (*Etym.* IX.i.12; trans. Barney et al. 2006: 192).

At the same time, the account of the angelic speech in *In tenga bithnua* makes an effort to draw parallels with human speech. The short transcriptions provided by the author imply that the language of heaven has its own vocabulary, pronunciation and syntax. For instance, the phrase *Læ uide fodea tabo abelia albe fab* is apparently equivalent to the opening words of Genesis *In principio fecit Deus caelum et terram* ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’ (TB 15).<sup>304</sup> There is value in conducting a close analysis of all thirteen angelic passages to detect any recognisable patterns that would indicate how the author imagined this language to function on a morphological and syntactic level.<sup>305</sup> In the meantime, however, I would like to suggest that this attempt at representing angelic language brings us a little closer to late medieval ideas on mental language. What the samples of apostle Philip’s speech allow us to conclude is that the heavenly language conforms to what is called the ‘principle of compositionality’. According to this principle, ‘the semantic properties of complex units (such as phrases or propositions) are a function of the semantic properties of the simple units that are their parts (such as terms and morphemes)’ (Panaccio 2017: 21). In other words, in order for a language – natural, angelic or mental – to be able to generate an infinite amount of statements and for these statements to maintain a logical structure, it is necessary that this language be composed of minimal units with fixed semantic properties. In natural languages, these units are words; in intellectual languages, such as the language of thought, they are, perhaps, what Sedulius Scottus and Eriugena called *conceptiones mentis* or what Jerry Fodor referred to as ‘internal representations’ (cf. Fodor 1975: 124–56).<sup>306</sup> By providing transcriptions of angelic speech, the author of *In tenga bithnua* confirms

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<sup>304</sup> Carey (1999: 54 n. 10; 2009: 244; 2016: 88–9) also pointed out that passages in angelic language are only preserved in the earliest recension of the text in the Book of Lismore, where they appear ‘in enlarged script, recalling the use of majuscule or large script in other Irish MSS to distinguish main text from commentary and gloss’.

<sup>305</sup> A number of descriptive observations of *In tenga bithnua*’s angelic language was offered by Carey (2009: 247–9) who catalogued identical and similar words and word-clusters as well as recurring word-endings. He concluded that this ‘language’ displays a degree of internal coherence and is a product of spontaneous invention by the author. Carey (2016: 88) also noted that it does not have a recognisable foundation in any of the existing languages: ‘one cannot even, as is the case with many magical utterances, identify them as garblings of Latin or Greek or Hebrew’. However, Ciaran Arthur broadly characterised the vocabulary of the angelic language of *In tenga bithnua* as Irish-based words with Latin endings (Arthur, in preparation). On medieval tradition of ‘gibberish’ ritual languages, see n. 307 below.

<sup>306</sup> The alternative option, as Calvin Normore observed with regard to Ockham’s theory of mental language, is that a mental proposition can be viewed as a single complex mental act. This position, however, threatens the status of mental language as a medium of communication (e.g. for angels) since, in that case, ‘decoding each sentence will be a completely novel experience’ not based on previous knowledge (Normore 1991: 63–4).

that they are indeed composed of discrete semantic entities. This approach also echoes Gregory's statement in *Moralia* that the voice of angels *se [...] per distincta uerba explicat* 'unfolds itself in distinct words' (*Moralia* II.vii.10; *CCSL* 143: 65.57–8).

The imaginative transcription of angelic language thus aids the author's goal of presenting an image of heavenly communication as recognisably language-based yet inaccessible to humans. At the same time, however, one may wonder whether the resources of human languages could even allow to thus transcribe the incorporeal and ineffable speech of intellectual beings. The intent behind this tangible representation of an intangible language likely grows out of the medieval tradition of intentional obscurity whereby such 'gibberish' passages are meant to guard their meaning from the uninitiated (cf. pp. 120–1).<sup>307</sup>

#### *Telepathic Communication of the Eschaton*

From the example of *In tenga bithnua*, it is clear that angelic speech can be accessible to the human mind if the heavenly speaker wishes themselves to be understood. But are people themselves capable of speaking in heavenly language? The concept of a universal mental language hypothetically opens the possibility of telepathic communication. Angels can communicate in this way because their being is purely intellectual. And conversely, the burden of the flesh is what deprives humans from being able to exchange thoughts directly in their earthly life. This much is suggested by none other than Augustine: *Quibus omnibus uocibus corporaliter enuntiantis causa est abyssus saeculi et caecitas carnis, qua cogitata non possunt uideri, ut opus sit instrepere in auribus* 'The reason why all these utterances have to be physically spoken is the abyss of the world and the blindness of the flesh which cannot discern thoughts, so that it is necessary to make audible sounds' (Aug. *Conf.* XIII.xxiii.34; *CCSL* 27: 262.45–7; trans. Chadwick 1991: 294). Consequently, after Judgement the

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<sup>307</sup> It has been recently pointed out by Ciaran Arthur (2019: 202–3) and Deborah Hayden (2022: 371–4) that there was a great interest in the hermeneutic power of language and obscure discourse in different parts of early medieval Europe. Both Arthur (2018: 169–80; 2019) and Hayden (2022: 360–71) demonstrated that 'gibberish' in medieval texts often represents a specialised, ritual form of discourse (especially in the context of medieval English and Irish medical charms) which encodes exclusive, semantically charged knowledge. Hayden (2022: 361) also noted that the efficacy of 'gibberish' passages in charms could specifically depend on the recipient's unfamiliarity with the words uttered. Here, a parallel may be drawn with *In tenga bithnua* where the unintelligible physical form emphasises the heightened epistemological value of the angelic language. For further notes on the categories of obscure discourse in ancient and medieval traditions, see Blom (2012). For parallels to the celestial language of *In tenga bithnua*, though mostly comprised of Coptic evidence, see Carey (2009: 245–7).

resurrected bodies will be cleansed of any corruption and, Augustine says, *patebunt etiam cogitationes nostrae inuicem nobis* ‘the thoughts of our minds will lie open to mutual observation’ (*De civ. XXII.29*; *CCSL* 48: 862.207–8; trans. Bettenson 1972: 1087).<sup>308</sup> In this view, then, people have the prospect of mastering the angelic language, not just as listeners, but as speakers, after becoming members of the heavenly household.

This theme is continued in the Irish *Scéla na esérgi* which, as Elizabeth Boyle (2009) has shown, has recognisable Augustinian undertones. Indeed, the text centres around the minutiae of resurrection and therefore presents a perfect opportunity to consider the type of communication which will be available to the righteous in heaven:

*Dofuċfa dano cách thall na mbia fo menmain a chéli cen a falsigud o briathraib nó o chomartaib ailib, 7 tucfait o teorfégad spirtalla a mmenman na réta ata écnairce dóib 7 ata eterciana úadib (SE 86.2665–7).*

[Everyone also yonder will understand what shall be in another’s mind without it being manifested by words or by other signs, and they will understand, by the spiritual insight of their minds, the things that are absent and that are far away from them (trans. Stokes 1904b: 249)].

Thus we are presented with a concept of entirely internal communication, of a kind that is exceedingly reminiscent of the language of angels. It is based on direct exchange of thoughts between minds, bypassing ‘words and other signs’ (*o briathraib nó o chomartaib ailib*). It is important that the author specifies the lack of need for signs (*comartha*). A sign of any kind is a composite of the signifier and the signified, of form and meaning. Since the heavenly language is free from the transience of form, it has no need for the signifier and instead operates with meanings – the signified – directly. The author of *Scéla na esérgi* refers to this type of meaning-based communication between the resurrected humans in heaven as *teorféfad spirtalla a mmenman* ‘spiritual insight of their mind’. The phrase *teorféfad spirtalla* appears again in a later passage which continues to develop the concept of the heavenly communication of the righteous:

*Ni ó briahthraib immorro nó ó gothaib corpdaiḃ sechtair dogénat na noím in molad sa for Dia, acht o **teorfegad spirtalla** 7 o **scrútan inmedónach a ndligid** 7 a **n-intliuchta** (SE 89.2675–7)*

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<sup>308</sup> On Augustine’s doctrine of resurrection, see Bynum (1995: 94–104).

[It is not, however, by words, or by corporeal voices externally, that the saints will make this praise of God, but **by spiritual insight** and **by internal investigation of their form and their intellect**].<sup>309</sup>

This statement is rich with innovative and functional terminology. Boyle (2009: 222) discussed the term *teorfegad*, a *hapax legomenon* which combines a Greek and an Irish element, both meaning ‘looking at’ or ‘beholding’: *θεωρία* and *fégad*. She proposed to translate it as ‘contemplative vision’ which serves to emphasise the somewhat tautological structure of the Irish term.<sup>310</sup> The Greek word *θεωρία* was well known to Irish intellectuals through the works of John Cassian who advocated for a two-stage scheme of monastic ascent, from mastering ascetic discipline, which he called *πρακτικη* (*praktike*) or *vita actualis*, towards impassioned contemplation – *θεωρητικη* (*theoretike*) or *contemplatio* (cf. Dunn 2000: 77).<sup>311</sup> The latter is the tool for the study of the Bible which is comprised of four level of meaning – this is familiar territory by now (cf. n. 240). Irish ecclesiastics borrowed the term *θεωρία* into the vernacular and were well aware of what it represents: *Teoir .i. ondi is theoretica uita .i. betha theoir imchisnech .i. nech isinn eclais oc urnaighthi, nó a menma a nDia dogrés* ‘*Teoir*, i.e. from *theoretica uita*, i.e. a theoretic contemplative life, i.e. one in the church at prayer, or his mind perpetually on God’ (O’Dav. 1528; cf. *CIH* IV 1528.14–15). Interestingly, this entry from ‘O’Davoren’s Glossary’ makes a similar effort to highlight the visual aspect of the word *téoir* by strengthening it with a vernacular equivalent, in this case *imcaisnech* ‘contemplative’, the adjective of *imcaisiu* ‘the act of looking, beholding, contemplating’ (*eDIL*, s.v.). Such an emphasis on vision is also reminiscent of Augustine’s ‘inner word’ which, he insists, can be simultaneously understood as inner sight.<sup>312</sup> The author of *Scéla na esérgi* further qualifies his newly-constructed term *teorfegad* with the adjective *spirtalla*, thus stressing the crucial point that this vision is strictly incorporeal.

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<sup>309</sup> Here, I have combined translations proposed by Stokes (1904b: 249) and Boyle (2009: 221). Boyle’s (2009: 218–23) suggestions for interpreting philosophical terminology in this passage are discussed below.

<sup>310</sup> In the passage cited above, I have kept Stokes’ rendering of *teorfegad* as ‘insight’ due to its economy of translating a single word with another single word while retaining its visual connotations.

<sup>311</sup> On the juxtaposition of *vita actualis* and *vita theoretica* as a frequent trope in Hiberno-Latin exegesis, mirrored in the vernacular terms *achtáil* and *téoir*, see Wright (2000: 161–5).

<sup>312</sup> For example: *nec tamen quia dicimus locutiones cordis esse cogitationes ideo non sunt etiam uisiones exortae de notitiae uisionibus quando uerae sunt* ‘Yet because we speak of thoughts as speeches of the heart, we do not, therefore, mean that they are not at the same time acts of sight, which arise from the sights of knowledge when they are true’ (Aug. *De trin.* XV.x.18; *CCSL* 50A: 485.50–2; trans. McKenna 1963: 475).

*Teorfe gad spirtalla* is only one way to describe intellectual communication after Doomsday. In the text, it is followed by another terminologically sophisticated phrase: *scrútan inmedónach a ndligid 7 a n-intliuchta* ‘internal investigation of their form and their intellect’. Here, the term *scrútan* is a learned borrowing from Latin *scrutinium* ‘search, inquiry, investigation’. In accordance with the theme of interiority which dominates all discussions of mental language, the source of knowledge and understanding is said to be an internal one – *inmedónach*. What, then, are the inner aspects of a person’s nature that are being examined? They are *dliged* and *intliucht*. Of these two, we are already familiar with *intlecht*, ‘intellect’, ‘understanding’ or ‘thought’, which also doubles as a frequent term for ‘meaning’, especially in contexts that pertain to authorial interpretation or intention. To form an utterance in heavenly language is to turn to one’s own thoughts as it is thoughts that play the role of constituents of mental language – raw meanings waiting to be expressed in words or, in this higher form of communication, to be made visible to another person’s *intlecht*.

The term *dliged* has its own complex philosophical background which was masterfully elucidated by Thomas Charles-Edwards (2003). Initially a legal term meaning ‘law’, ‘right’ or ‘entitlement’, it was expediently appropriated by other domains of learning, including grammar, exegesis and computus. In these circumstances, *dliged* became a counterpart to Latin *ratio* – rational order or intelligible structure. On occasion, it could also be used to gloss Latin *intellectus* (Charles-Edwards 2003: 67). Continuing this line of argument, Boyle (2009: 218–19) suggested that in *Scéla na esérgi* the term *dliged* is used in the sense of a Platonic ‘idea’ or ‘Form’. So, each person will be resurrected as the incorporeal *dliged* of their nature – the perfect form ‘which corresponds to how man would appear if his nature were to be fully realized’ (Boyle 2009: 219). This brings additional nuance to the phrase *scrútan inmedónach a ndligid 7 a n-intliuchta* ‘internal investigation of their form and their intellect’: the knowledge and communication in heaven is achieved by each person’s close scrutiny of their mind in its ‘ideal’ state, when it approximates higher minds, angelic and divine, as perfectly as it could. When human intellect acquires this ability for perfect contemplation, it learns to speak in the language of angels and the language of God.

It is worth noting that the two Latinate terms, *dliged* and *intlecht*, appear side by side again in a passage that inverts the idea of intellectual communication to address the

fate of those who earned themselves a place in hell. The sinners will not have the privilege of communing with God and each other through the power of thought: *ni thatnéba dano i n-anmannaib na n-ecráibdech dlíged intliuchta ná tucsen solsi ecnai nó eólais* ‘indeed, in the souls of the impious the form of intellect or understanding of illumination, of knowledge, or of wisdom, will not radiate’ (SE 87.2682; trans. Boyle 2009: 223). All previous considerations regarding the functioning of intellectual communication apply here in reverse: since the souls of sinners remain corrupted, there is no clarity to their inner vision, and they are not elevated to the ideal state of being and of mind. Hence their intellect remains clouded and dark. It does not admit the light of divine illumination.

One final point remains to be addressed, namely that the description of the intellectual, telepathic connection between minds in *Scéla na esérgi* does not explicitly employ the linguistic metaphor, instead juxtaposing the natural language of earthly life, bound by the limits of physical expression, with what appears to be an image-based, visual form of communication. It is possible, however, to recognise the outlines of a language-based understanding of spiritual communication in the negative space produced by the dismissal of the corporeal aspects of language. The text draws attention to the fact that intellectual communication does not operate *ó briahtraib [...] nó ó gothaib corpdaib sechtair* ‘by words, or by corporeal voices externally’. This phrasing brings to mind a passage from the ‘Old Irish Treatise on the Psalter’ which was discussed in Chapter 3 (p. 103) in light of the connection between the outer and the inner word: *ol nach tan dofúarcaib int augtur bréthir for a gin sechtair, bíd bríathar for a menmain frisgair došuidiu* ‘for whenever the author lets out a word outside his mouth, there is a word in his mind that answers to it’ (OIT 409–12). Since the inner word, or the word in the mind, is the true cause of any and all external words, the elimination of the latter leaves us with the words and voices that are internal and intellectual. The phrase *ó gothaib corpdaib* ‘by corporeal voices’, moreover, calls back to an earlier passage in *Scéla na esérgi* itself, where Christ will call the dead to Judgement with his *guth nemchorpda* ‘incorporeal voice’ (pp. 250–1). Thus according to the picture that the author is painting, everyone who enters heaven will leave corporeal expression behind, so that both voice and word will continue to exist only in their conceptual aspect. Indeed, we have already seen that the metaphors of language and vision do not in any way displace, but rather amplify, each other in patristic and medieval approaches to the concept of thought.



## ***Conclusion***

After a detailed investigation of Irish approaches to the concept of meaning as an incorporeal (mental) entity in the previous two chapters, this final chapter addressed the idea that thought itself can be understood as a language of meanings. While the first systematic theory of mental language was developed only in the fourteenth century by William Ockham, the view of intellectual activity as language-based was advanced by many scholars prior. The appraisal of Irish evidence for such a view in this chapter took place within the framework of Christian salvation history, from the moment of Creation to Doomsday.

The first section considered the concept of the language of God in the context of the divine speech act which created and set in motion the entire world, according to the account of Genesis. Following Augustine's authoritative opinion, it was common to interpret God's utterance at Creation as belonging to a purely intellectual language. The association between a linguistic act and an act of the mind reaches its culmination in the Irish *In tenga bithnua* where God's creative act is presented as pure thought (*imrádud*). In the Hiberno-Latin *Bibelwerk*, we find another common exegetical trope which links the word spoken at Creation with the Word as the second person of the Trinity. The procession of the Word from the divine mind becomes a model for human cognition where the mind likewise constitutes the source of the intellectual, inner word. This idea is cursorily reflected in *Quae sunt quae*, where it is hinted that the internal *vox* in the human mind is an image of the spiritual *vox* of God at Creation. The concept of the intellectual language of God comes full circle in *Scéla na esérgi* where the voice of Christ – the Word himself – is described as spiritual and incorporeal. Overall, the idea of a divine language lays the groundwork for understanding forms of spiritual communication available to humans as similarly incorporeal speech.

Speaking of human languages and their ability to express divine insights, the second section of the chapter focused on two pivotal points in linguistic history, as presented in the Bible: the dispersal of languages at Babel and the divine sanctioning of linguistic diversity at Pentecost. According to *Saltair na Rann*, the tragedy of Babel consisted in the loss not just of linguistic unity but of mental unity as well, as the primeval language was often considered to be superior to the post-Babelic languages. It is hinted that, in their hubris, people might have forfeited a language

where the relationship between words, thoughts and things was perfect and natural. Although such a perfect language could not be regained, the hope of once again reuniting the human mind with the divine was given to mankind at Pentecost. We have seen that Insular authors, including Bede and the *Leabhar Breac* homilist, entertain the idea that Pentecost could be understood as a hearing miracle, whereby the apostles spoke only one language which miraculously adapted to the understanding of every listener. This interpretation suggests that the nature of the apostles' speech was such that it communicated in pure meanings, thus partaking of the qualities of the divine language. Additionally, the Würzburg glosses, equating xenolalia with glossolalia, suggest that the mind has a way of accessing the meaning of divinely inspired discourse even when its form is incomprehensible to normal linguistic consciousness.

Finally, in the last section we turned to consider two unique vernacular descriptions of intellectual language in heaven: the angelic speech of *In tenga bithnua* and the telepathic communication after Resurrection in *Scéla na esérgi*. The two accounts share important similarities with each other and with patristic tradition. Both of them highlight the visual aspects of intellectual communication, most likely following Augustine and Gregory. The emphasis on its universal nature is also reminiscent of the alternative interpretation of Pentecost as a hearing miracle. *In tenga bithnua* is more focused on presenting heavenly communication as a proper language, possessing of its own vocabulary, phonology and syntax. In this, it fulfils the principle of compositionality which is a feature of more advanced theories of mental language. The form of communication presented in *Scéla na esérgi* at first glance appears to be more image-based compared to that of *In tenga bithnua*. However, there are indications that it likewise implements some type of linguistic structure as it rejects the external word in favour of the internal one. Thus, in both accounts, the intellectual language of heaven can be understood as a kind of raw semantic output of the mind, not uttered physically but universally comprehensible due to its quasi-linguistic nature.

## Conclusion

Now this journey through early Irish theories of language in search of links between language and cognition is complete. Its aim, as stated in the Introduction, was to examine the ways in which Irish scholars of the early middle ages understood linguistic structures to reflect the work of the mind and provide a model for conceptualising cognition. Language as a universal and, most importantly, tangible human experience is a perfect tool for assessing and making sense of what happens behind the surface of sounds, letters and words. Once the layer of form is stripped down, we are presented with infinite complexities of semantic systems which, in their turn, are powered by our cognitive systems. This is exactly how the argument unfolded.

The study was comprised of three parts, which, in keeping with a medieval ontological and epistemological paradigm, constituted a ladder of ascent, of sorts, from body to spirit. **Part I** focused on the most basic units through which language manifests itself externally: the sound of spoken language, letter which gives it a graphic representation and word as an indivisible union of form and meaning. Each of these three elements is discussed in a dedicated chapter where they are considered as theoretical concepts within Irish intellectual tradition, including their use in grammatical, exegetical and poetic contexts. For each, attention was paid specifically to the way in which they relate to meaning, to their capacity to lead thought in meaningful directions by themselves, without necessarily being a part of semantically complete utterances. **Part II** was dedicated to the notion of meaning – arguably the central concept of this study, as it mediates between words and thoughts. It comprised two chapters, one dedicated to the relationship between form and meaning, where etymological practices offer us a glimpse into Irish scholiasts' views on the topic; and one that considers meaning as a fully abstract entity sometimes in Platonic and sometimes in Aristotelian terms. **Part III**, likewise comprising two chapters, primarily built on the idea of signification as a cognitive phenomenon and developed it in two further directions: first, understanding meaning as a product of individual cognition is a prerequisite of hermeneutics where discovering secondary, transferred signification is a function of the reader's mind; second, when meaning becomes equated with thought, such an equivalency creates foundation for understanding thought itself as a special, intellectual type of

language. With this, the ascent from the physical and external towards intellectual and internal is complete.

Thus, in keeping with the theme of medieval symbolism, we are left with a total number of seven chapters (cf. Reynolds 1979). The findings of each chapter can now be summarised individually.

Like many late antique grammatical manuals, this study opened with a chapter on speech sound, one of the fundamental concepts in classical and medieval grammar. The focus of **Chapter 1** was on two terminological items: *vox/guth* representing speech sound in general and *son/sonus* denoting a discrete phonological unit. The treatment of *vox* and *guth* in Hiberno-Latin and vernacular texts suggests that it was understood not just as external sound but as a conceptual entity that exists in the mind in a potential state prior to being articulated outwardly. In contrast to the undefined potentiality of *vox/guth*, the term *son* denotes a specific form, an abstract phonological representation of a self-contained linguistic unit. An apt analogy to it in modern linguistics is the notion of a phonological word. These ideas can be compared with modern approaches to phonology, especially one developed within the discipline of cognitive linguistics, where phonological representations are similarly understood to be primarily conceptual structures which can be expressed overtly on demand. While at first glance sound may appear to be the most physical aspect of language, and thus furthest removed from cognition, there is a conscious effort in medieval sources to highlight the conceptual nature of speech sound, alongside its physical properties. The concepts examined in Chapter 1 understand speech sound as underlying phonological structures that participate in the processes of cognition.

The evidence presented in **Chapter 2** showcased a multifaceted understanding of the concept of letter within both grammatical and exegetical thought. Much in the way that speech sound has a clear-defined conceptual dimension, so letter has many aspects that pertain to cognition. Not only does it communicate to the mind the notion of the sound that it represents, but letter as an object of contemplation possesses layers of extralinguistic meaning that lead the mind towards moral and spiritual knowledge. In a text-centred tradition like Christianity, letter is a symbol *par excellence*, it represents, in a way that reminds us of Derrida, the very possibility of signification. This idea was not lost on Irish intellectuals who celebrated the

semantic power of *littera* in ways that may be considered ‘unorthodox’ from the point of view of modern grammatical theory. But in these teachings one may recognise the exegetical technique of unravelling levels of meaning. The revered place of *littera* within the system of knowledge is justified by its antiquity and the fact that all alphabets (or at least the ones that mattered to early medieval Christian commentators) are genetically related to each other and can be traced back to antediluvian times when all spoke one language and are therefore artefacts of that original language.

In **Chapter 3**, we turned our attention to the last of the three fundamental building blocks of language – word. It has been shown that the criteria of ‘wordhood’ in modern linguistics are manifold and far from being universally applicable. Applying some of these criteria to Irish scribal practices revealed that they prioritised phonological structures and stress-units of spoken language in the context of specific syntactic constructions. At the same time, theoretical rules of word separation were based on grammatical – syntactic and morphological – criteria. When it comes to the scholars’ first-hand reflections on what a ‘word’ means, however, they unanimously stress the importance of its lexical and semantic properties. Word is thus the smallest lexical constituent of language, a unit that combines a defined physical form with a certain meaning – in other words, a true linguistic sign. We have also seen that this basic model of signification can be extended or modified in specific contexts. So, the term *bríathar* can metonymically refer to speech in general, as does *focal* which performs some lexical heavy lifting in legal and poetic texts, covering a range of meanings from word to utterance. Even when the formal aspects of a word are emphasised, as is the case with *trefocal* and Virgilius’ *fonum*, the orthographic manipulation serves the purpose of elevating and concealing the meaning contained within word-as-form.

The three chapters constituting Part I all variously touched upon the problems of signification in relation to physical manifestations of language. **Chapter 4** addressed this topic directly by considering the relationship between meaning and form. We started by exploring the theory of grammatical definitions the prominence of which in the medieval curriculum, as I have suggested, can mostly be credited to Irish grammarians. The practice of classifying definitions constitutes a systematic approach to signification which allows the segmentation of a word’s meaning according to logical categories. Two types of definition specifically deal with word-

as-form: definition of sound and definition of etymology. While both help to produce semantic inferences based on formal similarities between words, the etymological definition opens possibilities for creating extensive semantic networks buttressed by allegorical discourse. Moreover, it has been established that the definition of sound transforms the main premise of Stoic etymology in that it proclaims the relationship between form and meaning to be arbitrary. Rather than devaluing the purpose of etymology, this thesis stimulates cognition to look beyond one-to-one correspondences and enables a deeper understanding of the shades of a word's meaning by allowing multiple legitimate etymologies to coexist. This idea is implemented in the practice of *bélrae n-etarscartha*. At the same time, the idea of meaning as being contingent on form still enjoyed a prominent presence in Irish etymological discourse. It finds a reflection in the concept of *inne* – meaning hidden within a word or, at any rate, meaning which exists independently outside of the human mind.

The status of signification in relation to the mind is the theme of **Chapter 5**. Here, Irish evidence for the concept of meaning as an incorporeal intelligible entity took the spotlight. The examination of the vernacular vocabulary for meaning revealed two broad branches of thought: one in the vein of Aristotle, whereby it is understood as a product of human cognition, and one that views it as an objective extramental entity akin to Platonic Forms. These are well-established positions within theory of meaning as they can also be compared to the Fregean distinction between 'idea' and 'sense'. We have seen that the view of meaning as an objective entity often merges with the concept of substance which exists independently from the mind but is intelligible to it. Understanding meaning as a subjective mental entity gives rise to the twin concepts of authorial intent and interpretation which, as has been shown, is frequently the case in exegetical texts. Later in the chapter, these conclusions have been put to the test in the context of interlingual translation. Two case-studies demonstrated that, while meanings, as abstractions, can be universal and shared by all people, the semantic network formed by them cannot be easily transferred between languages. We have also observed that the practice of translation shares its methodology with interpretation (*interpretatio*), both techniques aiming at extracting meaning and filtering it through the lens of subjective perception to produce a new rendering of the original idea.

This detailed exploration of the concept of signification in Irish tradition led the study to its final point, where the boundary between language and thought became increasingly blurred. Thematically, **Chapter 6** continued to pursue the topic of interpretation. It has been suggested that hermeneutics – Christianity’s defining textual practice – is, to some degree, comparable to postmodernist approaches to text whereby meaning is created in the act of reading and therefore can never be fixed. Among Irish authors, Eriugena comes closest to postulating infinite potential of interpretation. As for the theoretical foundations of this seemingly radical position, we have observed that meaning in hermeneutics builds both on primary and secondary, i.e. transferred signification. The latter powers the mechanism of metaphor and allegory which, in turn, make possible all types of non-literal exegesis. Unlike literal meaning, which might be agreed upon by all, figurative sense is in the eye of the beholder, as it were. After an examination of Irish fourfold exegetical schemata, we turned to the simple dichotomy of *historia* and *sensus* which elicited multiple further insights regarding ‘double perspective’, i.e. the ability of a cognising subject to see simultaneously with their physical and mental eyes. The functioning of this literary device has been showcased using the example of a group of Old Irish narrative texts. I argued that it is possible to read accounts of ‘double perspective’ as a metatextual reflection on scholarly work of encoding and decoding layers of meaning in texts.

If figurative interpretation lays the groundwork for understanding semantic operations as cognitive ones, such a comparison naturally culminates in the idea of mental language. Interpretations of thought as a language of meaning are the subject of **Chapter 7**. While a fully systematic account of the language of thought had not been developed before William Ockham, many scholars before him were compelled to move in this direction. Traces of this idea are found throughout Irish tradition where they are tied, predictably, to the key biblical events that shaped Christian philosophy of language. Augustine’s authoritative interpretation of God’s words at Creation as being uttered in a purely intellectual language bolstered the association between a linguistic and a mental act. The idea of the language of God provided a model through which to understand forms of non-verbal insight available to humans. For example, an important implication of the unconventional interpretation of Pentecost which views it as a hearing miracle is that a divine message can be made comprehensible to speakers of different languages by means

of universal meanings. The Middle Irish period gave rise to two ingenious vernacular accounts of mental communication in heaven. While both emphasise its visual aspects and reject outward linguistic expression, it is nevertheless clear that the language of heaven broadly conforms to a (quasi-)linguistic structure, either through explicit use of vocabulary and syntax or by alluding to a certain rational order in the exchange of thoughts.

\* \* \*

Finally, we can revisit the research questions that were postulated at the beginning and guided the discussion throughout. They are as follows:

- To what extent were physical aspects of language understood to have a conceptual basis?
- In what ways was meaning considered to be a product/object of cognition?
- In what ways could thought be viewed as a kind of language?

Regarding the first question, this study has established that Irish grammarians recognised the deep connection between formal manifestations of language, such as speech sound, letters and words, and conceptual phenomena that inform them. So, for example, speech sound was understood as a primarily incorporeal phenomenon that engages cognition before it engages the articulatory system. Similarly, it has been shown that the treatment of the concepts of letter and word placed significant emphasis on their meaning-bearing capacity. Moreover, the rich vernacular vocabulary for 'word' allowed scholars to distinguish between nuances in its semantic functioning. We may thus conclude that already on the level of form, language was understood to be powered by conceptual phenomena. Chief among them is meaning, and the next question addressed in the study was how Irish intellectuals viewed meaning in relation to mind. It was established that, when understood incorporeally, meaning can be conceived of as an entity that exists independently of but is comprehensible to the mind or as a product of an individual's cognitive activity, a subjective thought. We have also seen that even those approaches to meaning that consider it to be isomorphic with form (viz. etymology) rely on its cognitive connotations to build semantic networks based on mechanisms of meaning transference. The latter also play a crucial role in biblical exegesis where meaning and interpretation become practically inseparable. Therefore, it has been clearly shown that Irish scholars perceived a strong bond between the semantic



aspect of language and the work of the mind. Lastly, it has been asked whether this view translated into the scholiasts' understanding of thought as being intrinsically language-based. The study demonstrated that Irish intellectuals, while they did not produce explicit accounts of thought as a linguistic activity, certainly conceived of certain aspects of cognition, specifically of propositional thought, as having the structure of a language, with meanings playing the role of word-like units.

These considerations served as the stepping stones in answering the main questions of the study, namely how linguistic structures were understood to be representative of cognitive structures. It is now possible to conclude that medieval Irish scholars saw many links and correspondences between the functioning of language and the work of the mind, from the conceptual bases of articulation and writing to parallels between meaning and thought. This study has uncovered a multifaceted understanding in early Irish tradition of the ways in which cognitive structures underpin the functioning of language and how language can be used to conceptualise the functioning of the mind. It has also been demonstrated that comprehensive scrutinising of Irish language-philosophical ideas can reveal a wealth of information about other areas of intellectual inquiry, in this case, philosophy of mind. In light of this, one might rephrase Emile Benveniste's statement with which this study opened: whoever tries to grasp the categories of language might uncover the proper framework of thought.

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