

Why do names change when you talk to someone in Irish ?

When it comes to famous Irish people, many actual Irish first names are well represented on the world stage. Some spring to mind instantly. We have actors galore - **Saoirse** Ronan, **Cillian** Murphy, **Domhnall** Gleeson, **Aidan** Gillen, **Maureen** O'Hara. There are international rugby players - **Tadhg** Beirne and **Tadhg** Furlong. There are many more well known Irish first names outside of Ireland - **Sinéad** O'Connor, **Pádraig** Harrington, **Caoimhín** Kelleher, **Brendan** O'Carroll and our former rotating Taoiseach **Micheál** Martin.

Many Irish first names are very different from their English equivalent - John (Seán), Frank (Proinsias), Florence (Bláthnaid), Hannah (Siobhán).

However, these names change significantly when addressing the person - this is because of the prevalence of the Vocative Case (**An Tuiseal Gairmeach**) in the Irish language (**An Ghaeilge**). The Vocative case is used when addressing or talking to people - typical examples using the Vocative in English would be :

Hi, George. John, come here. Sir, Madam. Hello, mate.¹ Ladies and gentlemen.²

Apart from the use of a comma when using the above forms of address, there is no underlying change to the grammar or spelling of the words and names involved. However, this is quite different in Irish and names can change quite significantly from their basic form.

In Gaeilge the Tuiseal Gairmeach is used profusely in everyday conversation. Take the name Seán as an example. When we say - Seán is here (*tá Seán anseo*) - the name does not change. However when we directly address Seán by saying hello to him, the Tuiseal Gairmeach must be used and the form of address is as follows :

Dia duit, a Sheáin. (the 'a' is pronounced like 'ah' said quickly).

The rules for the changes to **masculine** names in the Tuiseal Gairmeach are as follows -

- If the name starts with a consonant, the initial sound is often softened. To show this in writing, **h** is inserted after the consonant. Such a sound change is called *séimhiú* in Irish or lenition in English.
- Names that end in a broad consonant (i.e. where the final consonant is preceded by **a, o, u**) must be slenderized by the insertion of the **i** vowel before the final consonant.³
- Names that begin with a vowel cannot be aspirated and neither can names beginning with the letters **L** (Lorcán), **N** (Nollaig) or **R** (Ruairí)
- If the name already ends on a slender consonant, no change is needed (e.g. Pádraig - **a Phádraig**, Gearóid - **a Ghearóid**, Dáithí - **a Dháithí**).

The rules for the changes to **feminine** names in the Tuiseal Gairmeach are simpler, as there is no change to the end of the name - it is only necessary to add the *séimhiú* after the first consonant (e.g. Máire - **a Mháire**). Once again names beginning with a vowel or **L, N** and **R** do not take a *séimhiú*

The table below provides examples of both the masculine and feminine naming conventions -

English Name	Irish Name	Tuiseal Gáirmeach	Pronounced
Donald	Dónall	a Dhónaill	ah ghonal
Thomas	Tomás	a Thomáis	ah humaush
Christopher	Críostóir	a Chríostóir	ah khristor
Brendan	Breandán	a Bhreandáin	ah vrendawn
Owen	Eoghan	a Eoghain	ah own
Laurence	Labhrás	a Labhráis	ah laurush
Catherine	Catríona	a Chatríona	ah khathrina
Sarah	Sorcha	a Shorcha	ah huraka
Eva	Aoife	a Aoife	ah efa
Rose	Róisín	a Róisín	ah rosheen
Kate	Cáit	a Cháit	ah khoyt

And finally . . . even the late Queen Elizabeth was obviously a keen fan of the Tuiseal Gáirmeach when she addressed the assembled guests at a banquet in Dublin Castle with ***A Uachtaráin agus a chairde !***

Nótaí

1. Just as in England it is common to address somebody as *mate*, in Irish we often use the word **cara** (friend) to address an acquaintance - and obeying the Tuiseal Gáirmeach rules we must say ***a chara***.
2. Note that there is no easy way of addressing an audience as Ladies and Gentlemen in Irish. We can say **either *a chairde* (friends) or *a dhaoine uaisle* (noble people)**.
3. There are just a few exceptions to this rule - e.g. *Liam* > *a Liam*, *Proinsias* > *a Phroinsias*