Distribution of *Seann-, Aosta* and *Sean* Conveying the Meaning ‘Old’ in Scottish Gaelic

By Veronika Csonka

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**Abstract** - This paper aims to investigate under what circumstances the preposed adjective seann- and when the plain adjective aosta or sean is used with nouns to convey the meaning ‘old’ in Scottish Gaelic. A combined analysis of a corpus study and interviews with native speakers was applied in the research. Seann- is highly productive, may describe traditional, older types or previous roles, it appears to be the default adjective for ‘old’, occurring in compounds, fixed expressions, names, etc. Plain adjectives are principally used in Lewis (and Harris) to qualify nouns as opposed to southern dialects. They are preferred when referring to biological (or physical) age. Sean is rare in present day speech, preferred in southern dialects, while aosta is more typical in Lewis. For certain speakers, aosta refers to an older age than sean, alternatively aosta conveys respect. Contrastive contexts may encourage the distinction between the two adjectival types, and thus the use of the plain adjective. Aosta may display more poetic qualities, which renders it efficient in poetic descriptions.

**Keywords:** seann-, aosta, sean, preposed adjectives.

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I. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate the difference between phrases containing the preposed adjective seann(n)- and phrases with the plain adjectives sean or aosta, meaning ‘old’, as well as to identify some rules and factors which determine compoundhood in such phrases. The plain adjectives sean and aosta show predicative as well as attributive functions in the corpus; only the latter of these functions has been studied in this research. The paper is based on a corpus study carried out on a subcorpus of the Corpas na Gàidhlig (The Corpus of Scottish Gaelic), as well as on interviews with 10 native speakers to check and refine the observations arising from the corpus study. Throughout the paper, preposed adjectives (when referring to them separately) are marked with a hyphen to distinguish between the preposed and plain adjectival forms (i.e. sean(n)- vs aosta/sean).

After the description of methods and materials, data and statistics from the corpus study are introduced, followed by the discussion of the corpus study with a section on coordination and contrast (i.e. cooccurrence with the opposite adjectives òg ‘young’, úr and nuadh ‘fresh, new’) as well as on context (with other adjectives, such as còir ‘kind’ and liath ‘grey’). In Section 3.4 the distribution of seann- and aosta is explained; followed by a section on potential compounds and fixed expressions. In Section 3.6, lenition after seann- is studied. Finally, in Section 4, the results of the interviews with native Scottish Gaelic speakers are discussed.

II. Methods and Materials

a) Corpus study

A subcorpus of 74 texts was created from the 205 texts contained in the Corpas na Gàidhlig, which is a part of the DASG project, and which was established by Roibeard Ó Maolalailigh at the Department of Celtic and Gaelic, University of Glasgow, in 2008 (see Ó Maolalailigh 2013, and Ó Maolalailigh 2016 on Corpas na Gàidhlig and DASG). In order to collect data from the corpus, the freeware concordance package AntConc (version 3.2.4 for Windows) was used (developed by Laurence Anthony, Waseda University, Japan).

In the corpus study I wished to compare the use of the preposed adjective sean(n)- and attributive plain adjectives aosta/sean (A+N and N+A phrases, respectively), with the meaning ‘old’. For that purpose I collected all phrases containing these words occurring in a subcorpus of 74 texts from the 205 texts of the Corpas na Gàidhlig (The Corpus of Scottish Gaelic). All of these sources were published in the 20th century (or at the beginning of the 21st century): the texts originate from 1859–2005 (the earliest material in one of the sources dates back to the early 19th century). They represent various dialects, most from the Outer Hebrides (ever more from Lewis towards later sources: the last 8 between 1990 and 2005 are all from Lewis). The registers also embrace a vast range of styles: poetry (poems and songs), prose (novels, short stories), essays, narratives (storytelling); religious hymns, prayers and biblical texts; some descriptions for museums, drama, history, riddles; a couple of academic texts, political and law texts; a handbook for home nursing, a war diary, one instance of literal correspondence.

Subsequently, I carried out statistic analysis on the occurrences of adjectival phrases (A+N or N+A). In the statistic analysis I use the following terms: token: one occurrence of a certain phrase type: all occurrences of the same phrase

I provided the mean/average of the occurrences for both preposed and plain adjectival phrases: }

\[
\bar{x} = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} x_i, \quad \text{where } x_i \text{ is the occurrence, i.e. number of }
\]

1 Digital Archive of Scottish Gaelic (Dàta airson Stòras na Gàidhlig)

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tokens for each type and $N$ the number of all occurrences of all types, i.e. the total number of tokens. The standard deviation (the square root of variance):

$$\sigma = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N} \sum x_i^2 - \left( \frac{1}{N} \sum x_i \right)^2}$$

indicates the expected occurrence of a type in general, i.e. how far it may fall from the average. The sum of these two (mean + standard deviation) gives the threshold value over which the frequency of a type is salient compared to the average. I also gave the type/token ratio (in percentage), which identifies vocabulary richness (type/token = vocabulary richness).

b) Interviews

In the interviews 10 informants were interviewed (6 from Lewis, 1 from Harris, 3 from South Uist). Each interview lasted for 30–40 minutes, and the test included 3 exercises in order to explore the meaning and use of preposed and plain adjectives. The exercises were mainly translations, and a picture description. The exercises were constructed to investigate conceptuality in preposed adjectives vs tangibility in plain adjectives; the role of contrast in sentences containing both the preposed adjective seann- and the attributive plain adjective aosta/sean for ‘old’; etc. The productivity of the different types of adjectives was examined by nonsensible or loan words, and the conceptualising role of preposed adjectives was studied by unusual collocates.

The disadvantages of explicit questions and translation lists are obvious: informants tend to use prestigious forms without realising it. Another problem could be that they start seeing a pattern or will not concentrate on the actual collocate, which could influence their word choice – either using the same kind of adjective spontaneously, or (probably less usually) changing it for variation. In neither case do we gain a reliable picture of actual everyday speech. To minimise this problem the translations were mixed up and a couple of irrelevant examples were applied in the questionnaire as an attempt to distract the attention from preposed adjectives.

Due to limitation of time and of the length of the test, some aspects of the interviews did not work out in the planned way and only a small number of the questions could be addressed from those emerging from the corpus study. Therefore the chapter on native speakers’ judgements is not so high in proportion to the amount of data analysed in the corpus study. On the other hand, this part of the research has clarified many of the questions which were addressed in the interviews, and in some cases even questions that I did not specifically raised. These include an insight to dialectal difference between Lewis and the southern islands, as well as the difference between the attributive plain adjectives sean and aosta. The advantages and disadvantages of both methods used are presented in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advantages</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>corpus study</td>
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<td>interviews</td>
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III. Results of the Corpus Study

a) Data

In the case of the adjective ‘old’, Scottish Gaelic distinguishes the preposed (attributive) adjective sean(n)-, attributive and predicative aosta, and sean in predicative, or occasionally attributive usage. Occurrences of seann-, aosta and sean are shown in Table 2, where the first column shows the total number of tokens produced by AntConc, the second only relevant tokens without words like seanchaidh ‘storyteller’, and the third contains examples that are relevant for the study (i.e. all predicative tokens have been left out for instance). In the case of sean and aosta, I give the numbers of predicative and attributive tokens separately.

$^2$ It has to be added that in this particular study the self-conscious aspect of the interviews might not lower the value of the results, as in the revitalisation of a language it may prove rather useful, especially in a semantic research: it may help to retain the colours of the language if the informant lays emphasis on any potential differences in meaning.
With regard to ‘old’, the corpus contains formally three different main types to deal with: the preposed adjective sean (n)/-sean/-seanna-, its form sean following nouns, and the plain adjective aosta(a) (generally written as aosd(a) in sources published before 1999). (I use seann-, sean and aosta as shorthand for these formal categories respectively.) Seann- has given 2306 relevant tokens, which can be divided into 479 types (thus vocabulary richness is: 20.8%). I have also found 3 tokens for leth-seann ‘middle-aged’, all with duine.

Aosta shows predicative sense in 208 cases (12 of which are back-references, and 3 comparatives), and I have also excluded the 6 superlative phrases to maintain consistency. I have encountered 2 examples with coimhead ‘look’ and 24 phrases with fàs ‘grow, become’, 4 nouns (e.g. An òige leis an aosd ‘The young with the old’; eòlach air a’ bheag ‘s air a’ mhòr, air aosda ‘s air òg ‘knowing the small and the big, [the] old and [the] young’; Thuir Aosd ‘nan Làithean rium ‘The Old of the Days told me’), and 3 occurrences of dè cho aosda/aost ‘how old’. From the 249 tokens 98 have proved to be attributive and thus included in the analysis. In turn, this has been made up by 59 types (60.2%). The difference of percentages might indicate that seann- is preferred to be used in certain collocates or fixed expressions in a great number, while the use of aosta may be more flexible, at least for some speakers.

In the case of sean (apart from its appearance as a preposed adjective), 5 (twice repeated) occurrences stand in place of sin (see below); I have counted 73 predicative examples (including ro seann(n) ‘too old’, (fada) na bu sheana ‘(by far) older’; cho sean ‘so old’, sean gu leò(i)r ‘old enough’, leth-sean ‘middle-aged’, and back-references, e.g. Domhnall MacGilliosa (sean) ‘Donald MacLeish (senior)’).

Example 1.

a. “Sean; sean!” arsa Cailean. “Cha bu dona ‘n tún a rainn (sic) e.” “So; so!” said Colin. “It wasn’t a bad job he did.” (lit. “That; that!”)

b. Tha lùidhte gu ‘n tachair sean cuideachd mu ’m fàg sinn an saoghal ‘… that that will also happen before we leave the world’

c. “Tha sean fìor, tha sean fìor” ʻThat is true, that is true’

There is 1 token with coimhead and 19 expressions with fás. Neither have I included coordinations, as I was not sure whether I should treat them as attributive adjectives or predicative back-references. Some of them functioned as a noun. I have counted 63 such coordinatives with sean (most of them with òg ‘young’, some examples with nuadha or ùr.

3 A back-reference gives further qualities of a noun already mentioned, normally in the same sentence. A back-reference can be interpreted as a predicative expression without the substantive verb (e.g. bha grunnan math dhaoine, og agus sean, an sin a’ coinneachadh a’ bhàta ‘there was a good number of people there, young and old, waiting for [lit. “meeting”] the boat’; Bha seann duin’ ann, gu math aosda liath ‘There was an old man, quite old [and grey]’), or it may be adverbial occasionally: Bha Uilleam, sean, sgìth, a’ coimhead troinn ‘n uinneig ‘William, old and tired, was looking through the window’.

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new”, including uamhasach sean no uamhasach òg ‘terribly old or terribly young’ and sean ma tha thu no òg ‘if you are old or young’). (I discuss coordinatives in Section 3.3.) Furthermore, I have not counted o shean (52 occurrences), a shean (1) and bho shean (11) ‘of old’. As a result, 18 attributable phrases remained, in 14 different types. 11 of these collocations have occurred once, 2 twice, and 1 of them three times; however, many of these are coordinatives. Excluding coordinatives, only 7 phrases remain which contain attributive of these are coordinatives. Excluding coordinatives, only worthy of analysis. As all of these occur once, and most of them in poetry (creathail shean ‘old cradle’, boile shean ‘old passion’, brataich shean ‘old flag’ (dat.)) sean may be neglected as adjective which follows its noun. Fion sean ‘old wine’ appears in a riddle which also contain rhymes:

Ciòd iad na ceithir nithean a’ s miosa anns an domhain?

Diubhaidh teine, fein ur,
Diubhaidh dighe, fion sean,
Diubhaidh duine, mi-run,
Agus diubhaidh nan diubhaidh droch bhean.

What are the four worst things in the world?
The worst of fire is that of a new land,
The worst of drink, is old wine,
The worst person, ill-will,
And the worst of worst [is] a bad wife.’

There are three tokens from prose. Beàirt shàmhach shean ‘an old quiet machine’ occurs in An t-Aonaran (with Lewis Gaelic), which represents a rather poetic language (see further discussion in Section 3.2). (In this source we encounter one example of the preposed adjective in seana mhaighstir-sgoile ‘old school-master’, whereas the rest of the tokens are qualified with aosda.) One of the remaining tokens includes a contrast with òg ‘young’: Dh’ thaodadh a’ chàraid òg (no is dòcha a’ chàraid shean) ‘Maybe the young couple (or perhaps the old couple)’; and it may share two features with the last example, (bho) bhodach sean bochd ‘(from) a poor old man’, namely that it originates from Skye (the utterer of the latter (the imaginary writer of the correspondence) comes from Skye; this also applies to the riddle above), and that it was possibly⁴ written in the early part of the 20th century. Attributive, plain adjective sean may represent an old-fashioned use, considering that 3 of 7 examples date from the early 20th century. The date of origin of 3 is uncertain, whereas the remaining 1 token is from Lewis (1976) (just as na linctean neo-shean ‘the recent (lit. “not old”) centuries’ from 1971, and searbhanta leth-shean ‘a middle-aged servant’ from 2001).⁵ Regarding (bho) bhodach shean bochd, its source contains 4 tokens of coordinative sean as well. The sources of both latter examples show plenty of occurrences of preposed sean.

Among my examples with preposed sean-, I have included 32 names or nicknames (e.g. sean Chatriona, seann Johan, seann MhacGilliosa, seann Ghuaiderini, seanna Mhàiri Logan; Seann Choinneach (where sean is part of the name), seann Ruairidh Dhomhnnaill Chaol, seann Fheàir Ghrìainail ‘old Man of Grianail’, seann Righ Cuibhle ‘old King Wheel’; Sean Cheathamaich (Braighe) Lochabair (lain Odhart); also with titles: seann Mhgr. Curdie ‘old Mr Curdie’, seann Dòtaí Ros ‘old Dr Ross’; and one Biblical name: seann Mhaois ‘old Moses’), 23 placenames (seann Rhudha Stòrr (sic!), seann Dùn-Aluinn, seann Albainn ‘old Scotland’), 20 nationalities or origins (e.g. seann Eiphitich ‘old Egyptians’, seann Lochlannaich ‘old Scandinavians/Norsemen’, sean Gheararmaiteach ‘an old German’, seann Sgitheanaich ‘old people from Skye’, seann Hiortaich ‘old people from St. Kilda’, seann Ghaidheil ‘old Gaels’) and 80 languages (e.g. seann Ghrugas ‘ancient Greek’, Seann Innis-Tilis ‘Old Icelandic’, seann-Ghaeilge/Sean-Ghàidhlig ‘Old Irish’, seann Chumhris ‘Old Welsh’); which add up 155 proper names in 2306 tokens (6.7%). Among attributive aosda, I have counted 1 name (Aonghas aosda ‘old Angus’), and 3 placenames (na Cuimhrigh aosd ‘of old Wales’, Nis aosda ‘old Ness’, Ayr aosda ‘old Ayr’); i.e. 4 out of 98 tokens (4.1%). The plain adjective sean qualifies 1 word of nationality (gach Gheararmaiteach sean is òg ‘every German, old and young’), although this one could be counted as a predicative back-reference. (Although I have not found other proper nouns with the plain adjective sean, it has to be noted that there are very few tokens for this form to make proper statistics.)

I have also included coordinatives, and counted with both nouns, separately (e.g. seann thear agus bean ‘old man and woman’, seann bhàrdachd agus/is sgeulachdán ‘old poetry and stories’; bràthreachan ‘an old storyteller family’, lit. “family of storytellers”, with the base word in accordance with similar seann shliochd rìoghair/bhàrdail ‘an old royal/bardic lineage’.

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⁴ The book in which it was published contains texts written between 1903 and 1970.

⁵ Preference for the plain adjective aosda in Lewis is also common, as discussed later, in Section 3.2 (see also 3.4 and 3.5.1).
I have counted seann ana-miann (pl) (1) together with seann-mhiann (1) ‘old desire(s)’, comharran (pl) (1) with comharradh (1) ‘sign(s)’, cleachdadh (12) with cleachdan (pl) (3) and cleachdainn (6) ‘custom(s)’ (as shown below), tugha (1) with tugadh (1) ‘thatch’, and sgeulachd/sgialachd (21) with sgeul/sgiala (3) ‘story’ (but not with sgeul (11) ‘story’).  

Example 2.  

a. ‘a gheidheadh nan seann bheus a ‘preserving the old virtues and old customs/habits’  
b. … nach eil e idir faeagarrach no buannachdail a bhith deanamh faic air na seann nithean ‘s air na seann bhreachdan, ‘s air na seann cleachdannan … ‘it isn’t at all appropriate or profitable to scorn the old things or the old ideas/views, or the old habits …  
c. … bha e ainmeil leis an eòlas a bha aige air sgeulachdan agus seann chleachdannan ‘… he was famous for the knowledge he had about the stories and old habits of the folk/community.’  

On the other hand, I have not counted gnàth ‘convention, custom, practice’ together with gnàths ‘custom, fashion; nature’. Aosta is intensified with ro in two cases, which I have included in the statistics: mnathan ro aosda ‘too/very old women’, (do) bhliadhnamach ro-aosda ‘(your) too old years’ (i.e. ‘considerably old age’).  

I have not counted attributive comparatives (e.g. gheibh mi lorg air duine nas aosda na sibhs I’ll find someone older than yourself) and superlatives (e.g. an seorsa creag as aosda anns na h-eileanan Breatainn ‘one of the oldest kinds of rock in the British isles’), nor expressions with cho sean (15), cho aosda/aosta (common with ni/s) (24); including cho faillineach aod ‘so fallible old’ (physically), cho searsrach aosda ‘so steady old’, cha mhòr cho aosda ‘almost as old’, leth cho aosda ‘half as old’), seann gu leò(l)ir (2), aod (a)/aost gu leò(l)ir (10) ‘old enough’, as these may be regarded as predicative back-references – the two examples of seann gu leò(l)ir are evidently predicative:  

Example 3.  

a. no ri sam bith eile bhiodh seann gu leòr ‘or anything else that would be old enough’  
b. An theadhainn againn tha seann gu leòr ‘Those of us who are old enough’  

Neither have I included leth(-)sheann duine (3) ‘a middle-aged man’ and searbhanta leth-shean ‘a middle-aged servant’ and the expression (anns na) linntean neo-shean (with prefixed seann) ‘(in the) recent centuries’. I have counted seann in a seann (seann) chionta ‘his (her) old sins’ and aosd in fear/an theadhainn aosd-aosd ‘a really old person/the really old ones’ only once.  

Seann- qualifies a number of compound words and names. In the statistics I counted some of them together with their base-words (i.e. generic), while others separately. Compounds which identify a certain type of their generics have been counted together with their generics (e.g. a particular type of tree, kind of dog, a folksong with a specific theme or an object of a specific material, etc) as well as place names or institutes qualified by seann-:  

Example 4.  

a. Types:  

sean bhean-usal ‘old noble-woman’ (1/73 – 1.4%)  
seann-òran seilge ‘traditional hunting song’ (2/23 – 8.7%)  
sheann ghàrradh-cloiche ‘old stone-garden’ (1/2)  
(sepecies) seann chraobh sheilich ‘old willow tree’ (6), s. chraobh dharach ‘old oak tree’ (2), s. chraobh ghiubhais ‘old fir tree’ (1), s. chraobh leamhain ‘old elm tree’ (1) (10 compounds out of 16 tokens for craobh – 62.5%)  
seann chu chaorach ‘old sheepdog’ (1/4)  
(material) seann chòta-clö ‘old tweed coat’ (1/5), seann seacaidan clö ‘old tweed jackets’ (1/6)  
seann luibhean talmhainn ‘old continental plants’ (3/4)  

b. Placenames/institutes:  

seann qualifies the name: e.g. na seann Choll Albannaich ‘of the old Scottish Forest’, seann eaglais Hogh/Seann Eaglais Hogh Mòr ‘the old church of (Big) Hogh’, an t-seann Chill ‘the old Kirk’ /seann Chill Chatain ‘old Kilchattan’  

seann makes part of the name: Seana Chreig ‘Old Cliff’ I have also counted seann sia sgillinn ‘old sixpence’ (1) as seann sgillinn ‘old penny’ (3), treating sia sgillinn ‘sixpence’ as a compound.  

In other compound expressions I have counted the words in two groups: one for simple words and one for compounds (i.e. I counted the compound expressions as one, but separately from the single words they are based on). These contain professions, expressions which identify a less compositional type of the generic, where the specifier precedes the generic (proper compound), or where seann qualifies a fixed expression.  

Example 5.  

a. Professions:  

bean ‘woman; wife’ (73) – seann mhàth-ailtruim ‘old nurse’, seann bhean-thighe ‘old weaveress’, seann bhean-ghlùin ‘old midwife’ (3)  
fear ‘man’ (11) – seann thear-eàlais ‘old scientist/scholar’ (1)
maighstir 'master' (2) – seana maighstir-sgoile 'old schoolmaster' (1)

b. Other improper compounds:
bodach 'old man; fellow' (32) – a shean bhodaich-truisg 'old cod-man (voc.)' (1)
àite 'place' (2) – sheann aitean-adhlac 'old resting places', seann ait-'analach 'old cemetery' (2)
taigh 'house' (34) – seann taighean-dubha 'old black-houses', seann taigh-solais 'old lighthouse', seann taigh-sgoile 'old schoolhouse', seann taigh ciobair 'old "keeper's" (i.e. shepherd's) house', seann tigh-chearc 'old hen-house', seann tigh-còmhnuidh 'old dwelling', seann tigh-stad 'old inn', seann tighean-aoraidh 'old chapels' (8)
muc 'pig' (1) – shean mhuc-bhiorach 'old bottlenosed dolphin' (1)
dòigh 'way' (25) – sean dòigh-sgriobhaidh 'old writing style', shean dòigh-beatha 'old lifestyle' (2)
sean mhodhanna 'old ethics' (1) seann mhodh labhairt 'old manner of speech' (1)
comharradh (1) / comharran (1) 'mark, sign' – seann chomharradh-crìche (4)/ s. chomharran-crìche (12) 'old boundary mark'

c. Proper compound:
gnàth 'custom, practice' (1) – seann gnàth-thiosachad 'old common knowledge' (1)

d. Fixed expression:
seann linntean 'old centuries' (10) – Seann Linn na Cloiche/Linn Cloiche 'Early Stone Age' (5)

I have also counted as one the following compounds:
seann charbad-ghiùlain 'old transport carriage' and seann charbad-cruidh 'old cattle-carriage' as carbad 'carriage' (2), rùm-cadail 'bedroom' and rum-sgoile 'classroom' as rùm 'room' (2), luchd-àiteachaidh 'local people', sheann luchd-eòlais 'scholars' as luchd-people' (2) (constructional idioms)?, seann Cheann-cinnidh 'clan's chief' and seann cheann-teagaisg 'headteacher' as cheann- 'head, leader' (constructional idioms) (2). (The corpus includes examples with and without a hyphen in both types of compound expressions.)

I did not experience the same problem with the plain adjectives: sean does not qualify any compounds in the corpus, while each generic occurs only once with aosta, and never outside the compound (often in poetic word combinations such as a chian chùrs' aost 'its old distant course' (poetry), a' chall-airm aost 'the old army defeat', or in AN compounds: Oisean nam min-chiabhan aosda 'old tender locks' (poetry), (gach seòrsa de) àrd-chlachaireachd aosda 'every sort of' old chief masonry/stone construction').
b) **Statistics**

Occurrences of attributive *seann*-, *aosta* and *sean* are shown in Table 3.

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<th>occurrence</th>
<th>seann: number of types</th>
<th>aosta: number of types</th>
<th>sean: number of types</th>
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The average for *seann*- is 5.1232, and the standard deviation 22.7067, which result in the number 27.8299 as the threshold over which examples are worth being studied.\(^8\)

\(^8\) In my discussion I apply the spelling for each type which occurs the most frequently in the sources for convenience.
occur with any noun in significant numbers, which cannot be found also with seann-. The few verbal nouns in the corpus are all qualified with seann-, and the only loan word with aosta is baidsealaír ‘bachelor’ (which itself has a much more common synonym fleasgach, which usually stands with seann-), whereas seann- qualifies a great number of loan words (see below).

**Example 6.**

a. Seann auntie ‘old auntie’

b. Seann-bhaisagal/seeann bhaisagal ‘old bicycle’

c. Seann teipichean ‘old tapes’

d. Seann sporangia ‘ancient sporangia (sponges)’ (biological category)

e. Seann pick-up ‘old pick-up’

f. Seann bitch ‘old bitch’

g. Seann thactaraidi ‘old factory’

h. Seann mhicroscope ‘old microscope’

i. Seann Statistical Account (of Scotland) (also in Gaelic as Chunntas Staitistigeil) ‘old Statistical Account’

j. Seann Science notebooks ‘old Science notebooks’

Just as in the case of other preposed adjectives, verbal nouns are much rarer. All of these are qualified by seann- (e.g. gach seann sgriobhadh, is sean ràdh ‘all old writing and old saying’; seann iasgach ‘old fashioning/way of fishing’). Seann- also makes part of compound adjectives like seann(n)-fhasanta ‘old-fashioned’ (14), seann ghnàthach ‘of old customs, conventional’ (1), seann-fhacal ‘old adjectives, verbal nouns are much rarer. All of these are qualified by seann- (e.g. gach seann sgriobhadh, is sean ràdh ‘all old writing and old saying’; seann iasgach ‘old fashioning/way of fishing’). Seann- also makes part of compound adjectives like seann(n)-fhasanta ‘old-fashioned’ (14), seann ghnàthach ‘of old customs, conventional’ (1), seann-fhacal ‘old factory’ (18)). All of these appear to be simple adjectival phrases, even sean-fhacal ‘old word’ in this case (note that a hyphen is normally present in the adjectives but missing in the nouns, the adjectives being ‘parasynthetic compounds’).  

Aosta is the typical qualifier of pronominal words like cuid ‘some’ and dithis ‘two persons’; however, tè ‘one (female)’ and feadhainn ‘ones’ can be encountered with seann- in a number of tokens (discussed below in Section 3.4). Aosta appears to be more common in sources from the early 20th century, and from Lewis in later sources. It tends to refer simply to age in most examples; however, its factuality is not so obvious in every case. In 4 sources (Deireadh an Fhoghair by

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9 Words that were once made up of two words but have ceased to be perceived as compounds – these words typically have initial (or regular) stress and the vowels in the second element are liable to be obscured.

10 Specifier–generic compounds in which primary stress is initial, yet the second element bears secondary stress, thus not reduced phonologically (de Búrca 1958: 74–75).
Tormod Cairnbeul, and three novels by Iain Mac a’ Ghobhainn – both authors are from Lewis) aosta tends to be used in a poetic way (see examples below), while sean- is sometimes attached to words referring to concrete nouns, objects, like sean bhòrd ‘old table’ or sean bhrogan ‘old shoes.’) In other sources where aosta can be found in a more figurative sense, sean- mainly refers to people or true compounds, or other more conventional connotations (representing old types of things, such as sean taigh ‘old [traditional] house’, sean thubhtha ‘old ruin’, sean tugadh ‘old thatching’, sean airgead ‘old money’). Also sean chainnt, sean ãòain ‘old speech, old languages’ appears in a poem. In these sources aosta may refer to age in a figurative, partitive sense (i.e. the age of the person; e.g. cnàmhan aosda ‘old bones’), or to buildings or institutes that have been existed for a while (cladh aosda Chille Chòmhghain ‘the old graveyard of Kilchoan’, ‘na shloinn seanchaidh aosda ‘in his old storyteller family’). Deireadh an fhoghair abounds in poetic references to natural constructions: fuarn aosd na mara ‘the old sound of the sea’, na creagan aosd ud ‘those old rocks’, leacan aosd a’ chladaich ‘the old stones of the shore’, as well as with figurative references to age: shùilean aosd(a) ‘old eyes’, ceann aosd (a sheannmhair) ‘old head (of his grandmother)’. Iain Mac a’ Ghobhainn’s novels also contain abstract or conceptual uses of aosta: …na h-uillt ro(-)aosda làithean ‘his ancestor’s/forefather’s old heritage’; na h-uillt ro(-)aesd tuilleadh ‘aosta/aosda làithean ‘his old life’; just like some poems from the first half of the 20th century: do bhliadhnanach ro-aosda ‘your too old years’ (referring to age); oighreachd aosd ‘a shinnsear ‘his ancestor’s/forefather’s old heritage’; laithean aosta/aosd(a) ‘past days’. In all cases aosta either refers to age, or something that has existed for a long while – additionally, it may be connected with wisdom.

Almost all adverbs qualifying aosta/aosda (buileach ‘completely’, anbarrach ‘exceptionally/extraordinarily’, uabhasach ‘awfully, terribly’, (gu) math ‘quite’, rudeigin ‘somewhat’, car ‘a bit’; aosda tuilleadh ‘extra old’) can be found in predicative/adverbal sense – just as ro(-)aosd(a) ‘too old’ (24 altogether, including ro(-)aosd tuilleadh ‘really too old, far too old’, beagan ro aosda ‘a bit too old’ and fada ro aosd ‘far too old’ for instance). 2 tokens of ro(-)aosda may be understood as attributive: de shlainte air mnathan ro aosda ‘of health on too old women’; gun do bhliadhnanach ro-aosdal A chrathadh chiot gu h-ealamh ‘shaking your too old years off you quickly’. However, the fact that both occur in poems, confirms that ro ‘too’ should normally be considered similar to cho ‘so’: as a predicative back-reference. Flor, just as in the case of other preposed adjectives, tends to accompany sean- (apart from the example fior àite aosda ‘a really old place’).

Example 7.

a. na fior shean Ghàrdheil ‘the really old (i.e. ancient/early) Gaels’

na thior sheann(-)duine (liath) “in his really old (grey) man” (i.e. ‘as a really old [grey-haired] man’)

fior sheann mh Nathan ‘really old women’

fior sheann leighreas ‘really old cure/remedy’

fior sheann luinneag an orain aca ‘the real/really old melody of their song’

b. anns an thior sheann aimsir ‘in (the) prehistoric time(s)’

thior sheann Talaimh/na thior sheann Talmhainn ‘(of the) prehistoric Earth’

de thior sheann lus talmhainn ‘of a prehistoric continental plant’

fio r sheann-Ch[r]úimreach ‘Proto Welsh’ (i.e. Brythonic)

Written with a hyphen, it exhibits a special meaning ‘ancient’ or ‘prehistoric’ (see Example 7b). The rest of the adverbs can be encountered in predicative sentences (uarnasach sean, uabhasach thién (sean) ‘terribly old’, gu math sean ‘quite old’, ro shean ‘too old’); cho is connected to an adjective in cho sean hasanta ‘so old-fashioned’.

We can encounter various combinations of sean- with other preposed adjectives: in the case of mo dheagh shean charaid ‘my good old friend’ this may indicate the compoundhood of sean charaid ‘old friend’, similar to deagh sheanmhair ‘good grandmother’; on the other hand, in ann an deagh sean aos ‘in good old age’, deagh functions as an intensifier. Corra- combines with sean - in corra shean dán ‘an occasional old poem’ and corra shean crabhcan ‘an occasional old hook’. Sean- itself may function as an intensifier before the preposed adjective droch-: seann droch shaoil ‘bad old world’, seann droch Nàmh ‘bad old Enemy’. This function is also present in seachd sean sgìth ‘sick and tired’. Aosta may show a similar negative connotation as sean- when combined with droch: fàileadh droch aost d ‘old dark smell’. The two adjectives can also combine with each other, as in seann daoine aosda ‘old old people’ and an t-seann mhnaoi aosd ‘the old old woman (dat.)’. Furthermore, sean- shows a special meaning in Seann Linn na Cloiche/Seann Linn Cloiche (meaning ‘Early Stone Age’, which sense of sean- is intensified in the compound fior sheann ‘ancient, prehistoric’), and it has even a more abstract meaning in sean uisg ‘stagnant water’ (with a similar negative connotation as aosd shows in fàileadh droch aost); Bha fàileadh bho chòt an dàma fear mar sean uisg. ‘The smell of (lit. “from”) the second man’s coat was like stagnant water.’
c) Seann-/sean/aosta in the context of other adjectives

As may be expected, coordinatives of seann-, aosta and sean are common with words such as òg, ùr, nuadh (see examples below).

Example 8.

a. nìthean nuadh agus sean ‘old and new things/matters’

b. sunnd sean is òg ‘old and young joy’

c. càirdean sean is òg ‘old and young relatives (‘friends’)’

d. gach cleachdadh ùr is sean ‘every old and new custom’

e. iomadh rud ùr is aodsa ‘many old and new things’

f. seiceidean ùr is seann bhòrgan ‘new jackets and old shoes’

g. an t-seann té ‘s an té ùr ‘the old female and the young female’

h. seann-bhòirinnach agus caileag òg ‘old woman and young girl’

i. Seann Ian agus Ian Óg ‘Old Ian and Young Ian’ (i.e. senior and junior)

j. Seann Isbeal agus na brogachanach òga ‘Old Isabel and the sturdy little boys’

This contrast is often observable in the context (in the last three examples youth is only implied):

Example 9.

a. Geug ùr air craobh aodsa. ‘A new branch on an old tree.’

b. bean òg aig seann duine ‘the old man’s young wife’

c. a’ chàraid òg (no is dòcha a’ chàraid shean) ‘the young couple (or perhaps the old couple)’

d. seann nìthean an éideadh nuadh ‘old things in new clothes’

e. bualadh […] air seann teudann ann an doigh ùr ‘striking/plucking […] at old strings in a new way’

f. (Dà rud nach còir a bhith famh.) goil an t-seann duine agus làmh an leanaibh bhig ‘(Two things that shouldn’t be empty:) the stomach of an (lit. “the”) old man and the hand of a (lit. “the”) small child’

g. (chum Anng) an t-seann làmh mhin ‘n a làmh an beaga fhèin ‘Annag held the dainty old hand in her own small hands’

h. (Sgreadail) mnathan aosd ‘agus ghrugach ‘(Screaming of) old women/wives and maids’

In one example prefixed adjectives are coordinated in a similar manner (which might indicate that sean chaileach ‘old hag’ should be treated as a compound): geàrr no sean chaileach “short and old lady”, i.e. ‘young and old woman’. Besides coordinating opposite adjectives, the most frequent adjectives accompanying seann- and aosta are còir ‘kind’ and liath ‘grey’. While còir is frequent with words connotating people, liath usually accompanies seann-:

Example 10.

a. seann bhòrgan rocach liath ‘grey, wrinkled old shoes’

b. seann duine mòr, liath ‘grey, big old man’

c. ‘na fhior sheann duine liath “in his really old, grey man”

d. na seann súilean liathghorm ‘in her old greyish-blue eyes’

e. cuid aods, liath dhiubh ‘some grey, old ones of them’

The last example proves that the qualifier of cuid ‘some’ should be the plain adjective. Còir ‘kind’ also tends to accompany seann-. Naturally, adjectives which refer to old age, weakness and illness are also frequently present in the context of seann- and aosta. Bochd ‘sick; poor’ is also common with seann- (a’ bheairt aodsa is bochd ‘the old and poor instrument’ is the only token with aosta, although there is one with the plain adjective sean as well: bho bhodach sean ‘from a sick old man’).

Example 11.

a. seann bhean choir ‘a kind old woman’, seann bhòirinnach còir ‘a kind old woman’

b. seann chaileach bhéag bhochd ‘a small poorly old woman’, an seann duine bochd! ‘the poor old man!’

The preposed adjective seann- may be single or repeated in coordinations:

Example 12.

Single:

a. seann bodach is boireannach ‘an old man and woman’

b. seann eòlas is ealain ‘old knowledge and arts’

c. seann bhàrdachd agus/is sgeulachdan ‘old poetry and stories’

d. seann phort no taladh ‘an old tune or lullaby’

e. seann eachdraidh agus beul-aithris na dùthcha ‘the country’s old history and oral tradition’ (not repeated) – seann eachdraidh agus seann bheul aithris ‘old history and oral tradition’ (repeated)

Repeated:

a. air na seann nìthean, air na seann bheachdan, ‘s air na seann chleachdannan ‘on the old things, on the old views, and on the old customs’

b. na seann rudan agus na seann dòigh ‘the old things and the old ways’

c. sean dàn no sean sgeul ‘an old poem or old story’

d. seann phiapearan agus seann leabhraichean ‘old papers and old books’

e. seann daoine ‘s seann mnathan ‘old men and old women’

f. seann mhaighdean, seann thleasgach agus seann bhiantrach ‘an old-maid, an old bachelor and an old widow’
Words referring to old customs or manners (like Example f) are coordinated as full phrases in the corpus, i.e. they do not tend to drop seann- before the second noun (cf mu sheann nosan no seann chleachdoidhean ‘about old traditions or old practices’ and nan seann bheusan is nan seann chleachdan ‘of the old morals and of the old customs’).

d) Distribution of seann- and aosta

The three most common nouns both with seann- and aosta are duine ‘person/man’, been ‘woman/wife’ and boireannach ‘woman’. All of these show similar patterns. The distinction is not very clear in either case, since both adjectives are present in most sources, with subtle differences in meaning. The collocate with seann- seems to be a neutral compound expression (e.g. ‘S ann thachair sean bhean thuagh orm … ‘That was when I came across a wretched old woman’), whereas aosta may be used in cases where the quality of being old is important from the speaker’s point of view. Interestingly, in the case of duine, seann- is more frequent in plural, whereas aosta mostly qualifies plural mnathan ‘women/wives’, whereas only 10 plural examples can be encountered with seann- out of 73 tokens for been ‘woman/wife’. (Naturally, the intensifier ro occurs together with aosta in mnathan ro aosda ‘too/very old women’, whereas flor accompanies seann-, even in plural: flor sheann mnathan ‘really old women/wives’.) In certain cases seann bhéan ‘old woman’ may refer to a particular person (… nach ann a chaith Coinnneach a shealltainn air seann bhean a bha air an leabaidh. ‘… wasn’t that that Kenneth went to see an old woman who was on the bed.’), as opposed to general statements like Sgreadail mnathan aosda’ agus ghruagach ‘Screaming of old women/wives and maids’. One of the sources from Uist contains many examples with seann- for all duine, been and boireannach – which seems to underlie my assumption that seann- is the preferred form in this dialect. There are also many tokens from the oral tradition of Easter Ross for seann boireannach ‘old woman’ and seann bodach ‘old man’ (and a few for seann duine ‘old man/person’). Boireannach aosta ‘old woman’ can be encountered once in the notes; however, the informants always use seann boireannach (lenited in one or two cases). Attributive sean appears in a poem, coordinated with òg: mnathan òg ‘is sean ‘young and old women/wives’.

Combinations of the two adjectives occur twice – one with daoine, the other with mnao (dat. sg of been): seann-daoine aosda chaithe shàraich ‘weary worn aged old people’, air an t-seann mnnaoi aosd ‘on the aged old-woman’. The redundant use of aosta may indicate that seann daoine ‘old people’ and seann mnnaoi ‘old woman/hag (dat.)’ are treated as compounds, although both tokens occur in poetry, thus it may only serve as a device for emphasis.

Another fact that could confirm the less emphatic, more trivial sense of seann- (included in the meaning of a compound) is that two other human denotations, bodach ‘old man’ and caileach ‘old woman, hag’, which inherently contain the meaning of old age (at least synchronically), are considerably frequent with seann- themselves (seann bodach 31, seann caileach 23). On the other hand, they show hardly any examples with plain adjectives (exceptions are bodach with sean (bho bhodach sean bochd ‘from a sick old man’), and caileach with aosda in a poem (d’ chailllich aosda chrùibe ‘your bent old hag (dat.)’), both appearing together with other adjectives in descriptions.

There are three further cases encountered with both types of adjectives which could be of interest, the first of these is a time expression, the other two are the pronominal expressions tè ‘one (fem.)’ and feadhainn ‘ones’. As mentioned above, seann- is the adjective used with words referring to time (like tim/aimsir and uair). In the case of làithean ‘days’, most tokens (24) follow this rule and have a very similar meaning. Nevertheless, 3 tokens stand with aosda (all three in poetry). These may refer to a person’s age, and/or are connected with cumhne ‘memory’.

Tè and feadhainn, usually exhibiting a pronominal sense, would be expected with aosta, which, however, is not attested in many cases. In the corpus, I have encountered only 1 tè aosd besides 9 tokens for seann tè (although 3 times in the same poem and further 2 in 2 other poems from the same source). Seann tè appears to be related to the more informal language of the storytelling register (3 tokens appearing in narratives, autobiographies). Another possible explanation for the choice for seann- is related to dialects, as the source of poetry containing 5 tokens of seann tè originates from South Uist. Uist dialect(s) seem to show a preference to use the preposed adjective seann- over the plain adjective aosta. Most examples of seann tè meaning caileach ‘old woman/female’, come from South Uist (the one from Lewis is encountered in an autobiography), whereas the only example of tè aosd is from Lewis.

Similarly, in the case of feadhainn (18 with seann-, 5 with aosta), most tokens mean ‘people’. However, there are some among those with seann-, which only function as a back-reference to something (like taighean-dubha ‘black-houses’, bòrgan ‘shoes’), i.e. it represents a rather pronominal sense (as opposed to seann tè, which happened to serve as a reference to an inanimate feminine noun in only one example). Seann-

very often occurs in general statements (‘the old ones/old people’). These statements mostly refer to old customs or lifestyle, which represents a very similar aspect to compounds like seann òran ‘folksong’, seann sguelachd ‘traditional story’, sean-thacal ‘proverb’, etc (being associated with traditions), or are related to old times (the ‘old ones’ may have been young then; cf
sean shaighdear ‘veteran’ below). Neither do the examples with aosta show a pronominal sense, all referring to people. However they appear to have a more qualifying function (as opposed to its more lexicalised usage in ‘old ones’), or may refer to a particular situation, rather than a general statement. Feadhainn aost(a), is more of an adjectival phrase (where the quality of age is more important and highlighted). Again, there is only a coordinative example with the plain adjective aosta from South Uist, whereas the rest are from Lewis. Seann- is more evenly distributed among the sources. A good example for the usage of aosta here is from Lewis: feadhainn aostd-aostd (pl) and fear aostd-aostd (sg) occur in the same dialogue. Both feadhainn and fear refer to people; however, their old age is even more emphasised by the repetition of the adjective.

e) Compounds and fixed expressions

In this section I discuss possible examples of compounds and other fixed expressions containing seann-. In many cases these nouns cannot be found with aosta, or only in a restrictive number, despite expectations (in that aosta is used when the collocate with seann- exhibits a special meaning). Nor are there any counterparts with aosta for the historic compounds seannair ‘grandfather’ and seannmhair ‘grandmother’ (as already discussed in Section 3.2). They can also be encountered in the extended forms sinn/sinseannair or sì/sín/sín(n)/seann(n)-seannair ‘great-grandfather’, sinn/sín(n)-seannmhair or sinn-seanna-mhàthair ‘great-grandmother’, or sean-seann-seannair ‘great-great-grandfather’ and sinn-seann-seannmhair ‘great-great-grandmother’. An alternative for sinn-seannair is qualified by the intensifier dubh (lit. “black”): dubh-sheanair (2) ‘great-grandfather’.

The words for ‘old-maid’ and ‘bachelor’ follow the same pattern in Gaelic: seann mhaighdean/seann-mhaighdean/seana(-)mhaighdean (6) or sean(n) nighean (7) for ‘old-maid’ (lit. “old maid” or “old girl”) and seana-ghille/seann ghillie (5) (lit. “old boy”) for ‘bachelor’. The corpus suggests that sean(n) nighean is preferred in Lewis, and seann mhaighdean in other dialects. There are two synonyms for seann ghillie, namely fleasgach and the loan word baidsealair, often qualified by the adjective ‘old’ in the corpus themselves: seann fleasgach, fleasgach aosta and baidsealair aost (the latter is the only loan word with aosta, it occurs only once in the corpus – in a present-day source from Lewis, among a couple of examples for the use of dona and math)12. With the words fleasgach and baidsealair, seann- may function only as a confirmation – a kind of redundancy, cf the example seann mhaighdean, seann fleasgach agus seann bhiantrach ‘an old maid, old bachelor and old widow’, where it could be argued whether seann is an important qualifier of fleasgach ‘bachelor’ and bantrach ‘widow’, which examples may inherently (though not necessarily) involve the quality of oldness, or they only follow a similar pattern to seann mhaighdean ‘old maid’ (which would be seann sheann mhaighdean if consistency were retained in meaning).

i. Traditionality

Seann sgeul (11)/ seann sgeulachd (21)/ seann sgeula (3) and seann eòlas (15) share the meaning ‘old/traditional story’; however, both have a more individual sense in some cases: seann sgeul/sgeulachd may refer to a story which is known by everyone in a community, similar to folktales or legends, while seann eòlas may be associated with the history of something or somebody in 4 or 5 tokens. In the 3 plural examples, seann(n) eòlaidean refer to ‘old stories’ literally, just as sgìalachdan aosda. This only example with the plain adjective appears in an abstract context from Lewis, in a source in which the use of similar poetic expressions with aosta is not unusual at all (see discussion in Section 3.2).

A very similar case to seann sgeulachd is seann òran (“folksong/traditional song”) (23) in that both refer to traditional mental products (just like seann-fhacal ‘proverb’ and seann eòlas ‘lore’ below), written with a hyphen in academic titles: Seann-Òran Innse-Gall for Hebridean Folksongs, and Seann-òran Seilge ‘traditional hunting song’ in the Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist). Another similarity, besides the sense of traditionality, is the use of the plain adjective. Òran aosda (3) may exhibit a more literal meaning, ‘old song’ (once óran Gàidhlig aosda ‘old Gaelic song’, in a poem); however, again it appears in a poetic context from the same Lewis source as referred to in the previous section (in which plain adjectives are typical), and in early poems (from South Uist).

Other possible compounds referring to the common heritage of a community include seann-fhacal, seann taisg and seann eòlas. Most tokens of seann (-) fhacal have the meaning ‘proverb, saying’, even when written in two words (seana fhacal/seann(n) fhacal) (according to Kenneth MacLeod (in one of the sources) gnàth-fhocal, also written as gnàth-fhocal or gnàth-fhocal, has the same meaning). Only in one token is it to be understood in the literal sense ‘old word’ (see below). The corpus does not contain any examples with the plain adjective (*facal aosta/sean), moreover, there is one token further qualified by the preposed adjective, meaning ‘old proverb’: an t-seana t-seanfhacail [sic].

Example 13.

... tha cuid mar sin de n bheachd gu bheil a’ facal “draoidh” air a thoirt bhò “dru”, seann fhacal airson darach, … ‘... some then are of the opinion that the word “draoidh” (= “druid”) is taken from “dru”, an old word for darach (= “oak”), …’

12 plain adjectives for “bad” and “good”, respectively
In the case of eòlas ‘knowledge’, both seann eòlas (9) and eòlas aostd (nam boireannach) (2; repetition) ‘old knowledge (of [the] women)’ have a meaning related to a common, general knowledge, or lore, although aostd appears in a more poetic usage from Lewis (see similar examples above – as well as in Section 3.2), whereas the one token for seann- from Lewis refers to a more tangible meaning (Example 14a) ‘old knowledge and arts’, or it appears in the expression a shean(n) eòla(ils ‘that he had known long ago’ (Example 14b). Seann eòlas may be associated with a traditional sense of knowledge, general wisdom, whereas eòlas aostd may be related to a less specific and more abstract, less acquirable knowledge.

**Example 14.**

a. Cha robh càil dé’n t-seann eòlas is ealain a dh’ àlaich a measg ar sinnseirean a-nuas triongh na lìnntean, ‘There isn’t anything of the old knowledge and art that bred down among our forefathers through the centuries,…’

b. Thainig an Caipteann dhachaidh gu clachan a sheann eòlaids. ‘The Captain came home to the village that he had known long ago (lit. “the village of his old knowledge”).’

Seann taighean (34) refers to ‘traditional houses’ or ‘black-houses’ (as I have already mentioned in Section 3.2) (see Example 15a below). Alternatively, in some poems, it may mean a house where somebody used to live (see Example 15b). The only token with plain adjective an tigh aisd ud (from Lewis again) may literally mean ‘(that) old house’ (where the quality of oldness is important). However, since it occurs in a context in which the same house has already been referred to as seana thighe, it might serve as a variational device to avoid repetition.

**Example 15.**

a. Cha charaicheadh i às an t-seann thaighe airson a dh’ aighdear a meascg a mhàiri agus dhàmhsì, ‘She wouldn’t move from the old house to go to a white-house.’

b. a shean taigh chlìüichich a’ bhàrd ‘oh famed old house of the poet’

Leag iad seann tigh Anna Shiosail,
‘S reic lain Friseal an t-each spàgach.
‘They knocked down/demolished Ann Chisholm’s old house,
And Ian Fraser sold the waddling horse.’

**ii. Reference to the past**

In two expressions seann- refers to earlier time, having the sense ‘former’: seann saighdear ‘veteran’ (6) and probably also seann(n) leannan ‘former lover/sweetheart’ (5). Sean (n) leannan occurs in early 20th century texts from Mull and Jura. Regarding seann s (h) aighdear, it would be worth checking whether seann- may simply refer to age, giving the literal meaning ‘old soldier’, or, rather that would be expressed by the plain adjective as in saighdear aosta. Similarly, I have not found any plain counterparts for seann leannan (although there are no tokens from Lewis for either of these expressions).

**iii. A fixed expression and an exocentric compound**

Seana(-)mhaide (8), although not a compound, in 7 out of 8 examples refers to a proverb (where it has the literal meaning ‘old stick’): An car a bha san t-seanna mhaide ‘s dubhich a thott âs. ‘The twist in the old stick is difficult to take out.’ (i.e. it is difficult to change ingrained traits, attitudes) (p. 158 in Saoghal Bana-mhairiche, ed. by Seòsamm Watson). However, there are no tokens with a plain adjective. Finally, seann triubhas (literally meaning “old trews”) is the name of a traditional Highland dance, and it refers to the title of the tune it is danced to (exocentric compound)13.

**f) Lenition after seann**

Most dental consonants remain unlenited after the dental ending of seann- – lenited examples are from Lewis in the first place. In saoghal (14) ‘world’, slighe (1) ‘way’ and in the phrase an t-seanna t-seanfhacaill (1) ‘the old proverb’, /s/ may change to /t/ in dative and genitive cases at least after the definite article and seann- – most of these examples are from Skye, one is from Lewis, found in autobiographies or narratives (storytelling register). Thomas Moffat Murchison refers to it as intrusive /t/ in the preface to Sgrìobhadhean Choinnich MhicLeòid (one of the sources) (examples are shown in Example 16b below). Most stops are unlenited in the source from Easter Ross (Saoghal Bana-mhairiche). Seann far-airn ‘old nickname/by-name’ (where seann qualifies a compound) and seann fear ‘old man’ (from Easter Ross) are examples for unlenited /t/ (an t-seann[n] fheadhainn ‘the old ones’ is always lenited, which resistance to change may imply that it is a fixed expression). Unlenited /m/ occurs only in the name seann Mairi Anna Dhòmhnallach (there is another example for an unlenited name in Example 16d). (In coordinatives only the initial of the first base noun is lenited: e.g. seann dhaoine agus boireannach ‘old men and women’, seann fhear agus bean ‘an old man and woman’.)

There is no obvious reason why there are both lenited and unlenited tokens in most sources, often even in the same words; i.e. there seems to be no consistency in the application of lenition. In certain cases it appears to depend on number (seann duine ‘an old person/man’ vs seann dhaoine ‘old men/people’), or on case (nominative: seann thaigh-seinnse ‘an old tavern’ – genitive: air beulaibh an t-seann taighe ‘in front of the old house’, dorus an t-seann taighe ‘the door of the old house’; nominative: na seann shaighdearan ‘the veterans’ – dative: na seann saighdearan ‘from the

13 “[t] he compound implies some referent which is not directly referred to by one of its constituents” (Kastovsky 2009: 332)
veterans’). Neither of these explanations, however, is sufficiently supported in all — or any — sources. /s/ may remain unlenited in a loan word, and lenited in other cases (cf na seann Science notebooks ‘the old Science notebooks’, seann seacaìd ‘old jacket’ — anns an t-seann Sheòmar-Leughdaich ‘in the old Reading Room’ from the same source) (/s/ tends to be unlenited in loan words, such as seann-sead ‘old shed’, seann-seileir ‘old cellar’ or seann seacaìd ‘old jacket’ in several sources). Seannair and seanmhair in most cases stay unlenited after additional prefixes of seann/sinn etc (i.e. in words like ‘great-grandfather’ or ‘great-great-great-grandfather’ — cf shean-shean-shean-seanair). There is a sole lenited token shean-shean-shean-sheanair out of 26 examples.

Example 16.

a. unlenited dentals:
   /d/ sean(n) dòigh, sean(n) dachaidh, sean(d) an dòthair, seann dealbhain, seann diabhail, seann duthaich, seann dreach thabhartaich, seann Dotair Ros, seann dongarees, seann droch Nàmh/air an seann droch shaoghal sin
   /t/ sean Talmhainn, sean taiddhreal càr, seann toibhtha, seann togalaiseachan, seann tugadh, seann thaghlach, Seann Tìomnadh, seann teudan, seann tèipichean cèire, seann-triubhas, seann-trainnse
   /s/ seann saoghail, seann-seanair, seann seanachaidhean, seann seòladair, seann sìogaidh, seann sàluighean, seann sluaigh, seann sia sìgillinn, seann Seumas;

b. /s/ > [t] (intrusive /t/):
   (s)an t-seann t-saogha(l)/l, às an t-seann t-slighe

c. lenited dentals:
   /d/ > [y] seann dhuine/dhaoine, seann dhachaigh
   /t/ > [h] seann thathg, seann thobhtha, seann thoghalach, seann thrainnsechean

d. unlenited stops:
   /p/ seann pioctairean
   /b/ seann beul-aithris, seann bitch, seann bòtan, seann boireannach, seann bodach
   /c/ seann ciopair, seann cruibhean, sean Caimbeul
   /g/ seann gobar

From Example (Example 16d) seann beul-aithris ‘old oral tradition’ (compound) and sean Caimbeul (name) are not from Easter Ross, the geographic origin of (na) seann cruibhean ‘(the) old horseshoes’ is uncertain, all the other unlenited stops are from Easter Ross (at least 34 tokens, most of which are unlenited /b/), just as unlenited /t/ in seann fear ‘old man’. ‘Intrusive /t/’ can be considered as homorganic defrictivisation.

IV. Interviews with Native Speakers

The corpus study has revealed many interesting patterns. However, many of these are suggestive rather than absolutely certain, and as such, require further investigations. One way to gain more insight into doubtful observations is to seek native speakers’ opinion on the subject. Each interview lasted for 30 or 40 minutes, and the test included 7 exercises (referred to as sections (§) in the rest of the chapter) altogether, 3 of which are relevant for this paper, aimed at exploring the meaning and use of preposed and plain adjectives. The exercises were mainly translations, which are described in more details in the following paragraphs.

According to my observations, plain adjectives qualify tangible nouns, while preposed adjectives convey conceptuality and abstractness. To test this observation, §1 contained tangible nouns: professions, animals, and vehicles. I gave 2 pictures of each to the informants with two adjectival phrases to be translated (I also used some other plain adjectives for distraction). In §1b the informants had to translate unusual phrases consisting of tangible or abstract entities and the adjective ‘good’, ‘bad’, or ‘old’ (e.g. old sadness).

The role of contrast in the use of plain adjective aosta (or seann) was examined with the following sentences (also in §2 and §4):

Example 17.

a. Gaelic is an old language as it stayed unchanged for centuries. (age)
   This song was written in the old language. (period of use)

The ancient language of the Greek wasn’t an old language at that time.

   (both – period of use vs age)

b. I’ve got an old friend from primary school. (existence of friendship)
   I’ve got young friends and old friends. (age – used together with opposite)

I also intended to check if my assumption about the poetic connotation of aosta was right with the following sentence in §2: The night whispered old words from the wood.

In §4 the informants had to translate nonsense words and loan words qualified by ‘good’, ‘bad’ and ‘old’. This section was supposed to identify the default adjective — the adjective used automatically, more productively by the speaker. Loan words may also relate to the default usage of adjectives with types of entities (e.g. object (yoyo), food (spagetti, sushi), abstract (déjà vu), etc). I also asked for the phrase true, old man in one sentence with seann-saighdear ‘veteran’ (lit. “old soldier”).

a) Informants

I interviewed 10 informants: 6 native speakers from Lewis (1L, 3L, 5L, 6L, 11L, 12L), 1 from Harris

14 I consider someone a Gaelic native speaker if their first language was Gaelic.
(10H), and 3 from South Uist (2U, 4U, 7U). Concerning
their age, 4 of them were between 25 and 60, and 6
were 60 or above. Their exact distribution among the
age groups was as follows:
20-30: 1 (Lewis) 1L
30-40: 1 (South Uist) 4U
40-50: 1 (Lewis) 3L
50-60: 1 (Harris) 10H
60-70: 4 (1 from South Uist, 3 from Lewis) 2U; 6L, 11L,
12L
70-80: 2 (1 from South Uist, 1 from Lewis) 7U; 5L
(12L tends to use only the plain adjective aosta’
in adjectival phrases, never the preposed adjective
seann-)

b) Results of the interviews
Similar to the corpus study, seann- has proved
over-productive in both dialects, with Lewis speakers
saying aosta as well. 2U from South Uist used sean or
aosta with pàiste ‘child’ (age of a person – nonsense
phrase) and aodach ‘clothes’ (object) (but not with
iàsgair ‘fisherman’ (profession), càr ‘car’ (vehicle) or
each ‘horse’ (animal)). 10H from Harris also uses both
plain adjectives (sean and aosta) for ‘old’, whereas 4U
(South Uist) uses only sean, to occasionally mark
distinction with the preposed adjective seann-. Among
Lewis speakers aosta was occasionally used to mark the
age of a person or animal (three informants from Lewis
(one of them was 12L) translated ‘old horse’ as each
aosta (it might have been influenced by the picture,
which shows a particularly old horse)).

1L and 6L generally used aost’ for a person’s
age (6L even duine aosta for ‘a veteran’, but seann
iàsgair ‘old fisher’ for a profession; also 6L was one of
the informants who translated ‘old horse’ as each aosta
[animal]). Three more speakers translated ‘old infant’
using the plain adjective: 2U (from South Uist): pàiste
sean/aosta, 5L: ìeanabh sean (although answered
tentatively, and did not use the plain adjective in any
other cases), and 10H: òganach aosta (the latter used
aosta with the conceptual word ‘sadness’ as well).
We can see that the plain adjective aosta (and
sean) normally refers to the age of a person, animal, or –
sometimes – object (e.g. aodach aosta ‘old clothes’).
This tendency is confirmed by the distinction between
seann-taigh and taigh sean for 4U: in the sentence Tha
taigh sean agam. ‘I’ve got an old house.’, taigh sean
refers to a house in which “everything is old”, whereas
seann-taigh denotes a previous house (e.g. the family’s
old home). I gave two sentences containing ‘old friend’
to the informants, separated within §3: one with
reference to ‘a long-existing friendship’ (I’ve got an old
friend from primary school) and one referring to age (I’ve
got young friends and old friends.). In the translation for
the first sentence every informant (apart from 12L) used
the preposed adjective seann(-). In the other sentence,
in which ‘old’ was in coordination with the opposite
adjective ‘young’, four informants chose a plain
adjective: caraid sean (1L, 7U) or caraid sean aost(a)
(10H, 11L) (five with 12L). Nevertheless, I doubt it was
influenced by the presence of the other plain adjective
óg, as I have attested the opposite in sentences
expressing contrast between the plain adjective m’ath
for ‘good’ and the preposed adjective dòrch- for ‘bad’. This
means that the above word choice marks the age
reference. Two informants from South Uist (2U, 4U) and
6L applied stress to make the distinction more obvious:
‘seann-, charaidean ~ seann-’charaidean (but seann-
charaid in the first sentence).

In the discussion of the corpus study I commented on the poetic use of aosta (see Section 3.2).
In the interviews I used the following sentence to check
my assumption: The night whispered old words from the
wood. I used references to nature as in the examples
from the corpus and a word combination which has a
specific, fixed meaning with seann- (seann fhacail ‘old
words’, or seann-thacail ‘proverbs’). However, none of
my informants changed this phrase in the sentence
(certainly apart from 12L who did use faclan aost’),
which they naturally found rather strange. They all
translated it as seann facail ~ sean fhacail ~ seann
thacail ~ sean fhacail. (4U misunderstood the
phrase.) I have to conclude that register might not be
the clue for the use of aosta in a poetic sense. Before
introducing an alternative explanation (in Section 4.2.1
below), I need to remark on the distinction of the two
plain adjectives, sean and aosta.
Two informants commented on this subject.
10H (Harris) felt that aosta, when used in relation to
people, is more polite and milder than sean. For 2U
(South Uist) aosta is stronger than sean, sean meaning
‘old’ and aosta ‘really old’. At first sight these two
interpretations seem rather contradictory. However, 2U
also adds that aosta refers to the older generation,
which may eventually mean that aosta entitles respect,
thus it may be felt more appropriate in connection with
people. (This also may be the cause for the decreased
use of sean these days.) In my opinion, this lofty
connotation may explain its use in more literary
expressions, and perhaps also with abstract concepts
such as brònach(d) aosta ‘old sadness’ (10H), déja vu
aosta ‘old déjà vu’ and toileachas aosta ‘old happiness’
(6L) (although 6L does not always distinguish between preposed and plain adjectives).

In the discussion of the corpus study I pointed out the high productivity of the preposed adjective seann-, and suggested that the plain adjectives start playing a role in the language when a contrast is evoked (see Section 3.4). To test this assumption I used two senses of ‘old language’ distributed between §3 and §6: one sentence referred to an older form of a language, the other to the age of a language. The third sentence contained both meanings. In the first two sentences all informants used seann-, apart from 6L (who translated cán an aosta as ‘old language’ in the sentence where it referred to age). In the sentence with the double phrase, stress made the difference for this speaker: Cha roh seann-chànan na Greugaich na ‘seann ‘chànan aig an àm. (i.e. The old language wasn’t really an old language.) (and since it is placed in focus, the speaker chose the preposed adjective in this case). At first 4U did the same, but subsequently this informant changed the sentence to make the distinction. 7U used the word idir ‘at all’ to emphasise the contrast: Chan e seann-chànan idir a bha ‘san t-seann ‘chànan Greugach aig an àm sin. “The old language of the Greek wasn’t an old language at all at that time.” 1L was the only informant who showed the expected result: this speaker used cán an aosta’ for age in the double sentence, and only there. 2U made the distinction as well, but translated ‘ancient language’ as cán an aosta, i.e. distinguished between the words ‘old’ (seann-) and ‘really old’ (i.e. ‘ancient’) (aosta) (see above, about the difference between seann and aosta for 2U). The other South Uist speaker (4U), who does not use aosta at all, chose cán an sheann for ‘ancient language’, although was not certain about the sentence. The same speaker made the distinction between seann-duine ‘veteran’ and flor dhuiine sean ‘ a true old man’ in the sentence He’s not a veteran, he’s a true old man. (This speaker normally does not say sean.)

Although 11L used the preposed adjective in all four cases, a very interesting phonological pattern appears to have emerged in the answers: it might as well be a coincidence but the speaker used seann-chànan ([ʃən]) for a language that is old (age) and sean-chànan ([ʃən]) for the earlier form of a language on both occasions. Table 4 summarises the relevant answers (any emphasis [stressed constituent] written in bold):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>age</th>
<th>form</th>
<th>form</th>
<th>age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1L</td>
<td>sean-</td>
<td>seann-</td>
<td>sean-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2U</td>
<td>seann-</td>
<td>seann-</td>
<td>aosta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4U</td>
<td>seann-</td>
<td>seann-</td>
<td>seann-/seann-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11L</td>
<td>sean-</td>
<td>seann-</td>
<td>seann-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6L</td>
<td>aost</td>
<td>seann-</td>
<td>seann-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7U</td>
<td>seann-</td>
<td>seann-</td>
<td>seann-... idir</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

i. More on the distribution of seann- and attributive aosta/sean

One of the major impacts of the interviews is clarifying the distribution of the adjectives meaning ‘old’ (i.e. preposed seann- and the plain adjectives sean and aosta). In this section more reflections are made on these words.

The meaning [being around for a long time] and actual age are very close meanings, which may be a possible reason for the spreading (and high productivity) of seann-. It is difficult to differentiate for example between a more tangible, physical age of a building (‘it’s old so it’s falling apart’) or the concept of having existed for a long while. Seann- being the stereotypical adjective for the sense ‘old’, phrases with aosta are idiosyncratic, unique in a sense (cf seann eòlas vs eòlas aosta for ‘old knowledge’). Their meanings can be illustrated on a scale:

animate: aosta/sean inanimate (tangible – objects) abstract (concepts): seann-

These meanings tend to merge (they are not clearly distinctive), which makes seann- spread in all meanings (living organisms have age in its more everyday sense (biological age), whereas old ideas, old customs, etc draw in extra connotations).

Aosta and poetry:

Attributive aosta and sean are the typical adjectives to indicate biological age, additionally, aosta may entitle respect. As seann- is so wide-spread, and for abstract nouns, in particular, the normal qualifier is the preposed adjective, aosta naturally lends idiosyncrasy to the phrase, being unusual with abstract nouns (e.g. in eòlas aosta ‘old knowledge’). In the case of body parts (as cnàmhan aosda ‘old bones’, shùilean aosd(a) ‘old eyes’, ceann aosd (a sheannmhair) ‘old head (of his grandmother)’), the poetic sense originates from the partitiveness (from the reference to a part of the body, rather than to the person themselves). Regarding
natural entities (sea, wind, rock, etc.; e.g. na creagan aod d’ud ‘those old rocks’, leacan aod a’ chladaich ‘the old stones of the shore’), we usually feel them closer to animate entities, living organisms, although from a more abstract perspective. (Here we probably deal with different levels of abstractness.) Aosta may in effect anthropomorphise these words (cf a similar distinction in the case of a building in Hungarian: régi kórház ‘old hospital’ – régi qualifying inanimate entities (i.e. objects or concepts, etc), this is the normal adjective in this phrase – whereas oreg kórház (oreg means ‘old’ in the cases of people and animals) displays a more personal, affectionate voice).

V. Summary

This paper investigates the use of the preposed adjective seann- as opposed to the plain adjective aosta or sean for the meaning ‘old’ in Scottish Gaelic. For this purpose a corpus study was carried out, followed by interviews with native speakers. It has been revealed in the research that preposed adjective seann- is highly productive. It occurs in compounds and fixed expressions (such as seann-mhaighdean ‘old-maid’, seana (-) mhaide ‘old stick’ or seann uisg ‘stagnant water’), it may convey traditionality, or refer to former types and roles. As in the case of other preposed adjectives, seann- is even more frequently used in southern dialects (e.g. in South Uist), it frequently occurs with names and compound nouns, verbal nouns and loan words. Furthermore, this is the usual adjective used with time expressions (tim, aimsir, and uair; even with latha ‘day’ in most cases). The most frequent combinations with both seann- and aosta denoted people. The corpus did not show many tokens for sean as an attributive plain adjective, the few exceptions were mainly found in poetry. Due to the high productivity of seann-, as usual, it is just as common in coordinatives (with òg ‘young’, ùr and nuadh ‘new’) as the plain adjectives aosta and sean (if not more common); however, aosta (and sean) are more common in listings (together with other adjectives – probably referring to age).

In some cases the choice for the preposed or the plain adjective is arbitrary, or shows an individual (and dialectal) preference for the preposed or plain adjective. Concerning the adjective meaning ‘old’, seann- appears to have spread greatly, as earlier sources abound with attributive aosta, while the later tokens are all from Lewis (native speakers from Lewis also used it frequently). Attributive sean appears to be more common towards the south (South Uist, Skye, etc); however, it is not so widespread in present day dialects. Seann- also carries more abstract meanings compared to more pronominal aosta (cuid ‘some’, dithis ‘a couple of people’); fedhainn ‘ones’, të ‘one’ (fem.), although the latter two, mostly being references to people, also occur with seann- in the corpus (in sources from South Uist). Seann- may easily connotate old types (see seann-taigh ‘a (traditional) black-house’ vs taigh aosta/seeann ‘an old house’ (physical/constitutional age), and seann fhacal denoting the old form of a word), a previous period (Seann Linn (na) Cloiche ‘Early Stone Age’) or a former role (e.g. seann taigh ‘previous house’, seann-chànan ‘an old form of a language’ vs cânan aosta(a) ‘an old language’, occasionally seann s(h)àighdear ‘veteran’ and perhaps seann leannan ‘old/former sweetheart’, seann theadhainn ‘the old ones’) and presumably traditionality (see seann(-)oran ‘folksong/traditional song’, seann sgéulachd ‘traditional story/tale’), as opposed to the most simple definition of age (biological or physical), which can be successfully highlighted by the plain adjective.

Attributive aosta (and/or seann) is often used to indicate a person’s or animal’s age (see for example caraidean sean/aosta(a) in native speakers’ translations for age reference in the phrase ‘young friends and old friends’), and it is also encountered in connection with living organisms (craobh aods ‘an old tree’), natural constructions, body parts, and other tangible (and countable) nouns, especially if it makes a distinction with a phrase containing seann- (e.g. aodach aosta ‘old clothes’, làithean aosta ‘past days’ – reference to somebody’s age or life, òran aods ‘an old song’ vs seann-òran ‘folksong’, cânan aosta (‘old language’, i.e. existed for a long time) vs seann chànan ‘earlier form of language’).

Although both seann- and aosta tend to refer to people, aosta is mostly connected with biological age, as well as with respect (compare Chinese lào ‘old, experienced’ which is a respectful address towards a senior member at work). This indicates wisdom in certain phrases (see sgialachdan aods ‘old stories’, eòlas aods ‘old knowledge’, a bhèrig aods ‘the old lie’), and may be one reason why it occasionally occurs even with abstract nouns (see e.g. 10H’s brònach(d) aosta for ‘old sadness’). Fàileadh dorch aost ‘an old dark smell’: highlights the aging quality of the smell (probably very uncomfortable as if food had been left somewhere for a very long time). The low number of tokens with attributive sean may be explained by aosta’s connotation with respect. Incidentally, the poetic quality of aosta, besides its phonetical characteristics, may lie in its relative rarity compared to seann- or, in the case of body parts, in partitiveness.

With respect to phrases with the preposed adjective seann-, a number of unlisted tokens are encountered in the corpus, especially from Easter Ross (lentit ones are principally from Lewis). These might be either due to grammatical reasons (such as case or number distinction) or occur in loan words, but it shows inconsistency thoughout the sources. In certain cases an intrusive /t/ (i.e. homorganic defricativisation) can be observed after the dental in seann-.
Bibliography


