

The 'Is' Verb, An Introduction

There are two verbs 'to be' in Gaelic: 'Bi' and 'Is.' It is said that the 'Bi' verb describes while the 'Is' verb defines. Learners usually encounter the 'Is' verb for the first time when learning about names and introducing ourselves.

Dè an t-ainm a th' oirbh? What is your name?
Literally, what (is) the name which is on you?
Cò sibhse? Who are you?

Is mise Goraidh. I am Geoff.
(Is e) 'S e Goraidh an t-ainm a tha orm. I am Geoff.
Literally, It is Goraidh the name which is on me.
Yes, your name is on you in Gaelic

'Is' is an irregular verb. 'Is' is a defective verb, which means that it doesn't have all of its tenses. 'Is' is sometimes called a 'decaying' verb as parts of it are missing! You will see what I mean shortly.

This 'Is' verb almost always prefers the emphatic pronouns. Here they are (again for review):

Emphatic Pronouns

Basic	Emphatic	English
mi	mise	me
thu (tu)	thusa (tusa)	you (informal, singular)
e	esan	he
i	ise	she
sinn	sinne	we
sibh	sibhse	you
iad	iadsan	they

'Is' has a couple uses, but the one we will be looking at for now is equating two nouns. Remember with 'Bi' we can describe nouns and talk about what nouns are doing, but we can't define them with 'Bi.' For that we have 'Is.'

As 'Is' is a verb, there are the usual four parts. Here is a chart of 'Bi' and 'Is':

Present Tense of the Two Verbs "to be" in Gaelic

	<u>Bi</u>		<u>Is</u>	
Tha e fuar.	He is cold.	Is esan Goraidh.		He is Geoff.
Chan eil e fuar.	He is not cold.	Chan ☁ esan Goraidh.		He is not Geoff.
A bheil e fuar?	Is he cold?	An ☁ esan Goraidh?		Is he Geoff?
Nach eil e fuar?	Isn't he cold?	Nach ☁ esan Goraidh?		Isn't he Geoff?
A bheil e fuar?	Is he cold?	An esan Goraidh?		Is he Geoff?
Tha.	Is. (Yes.)	Is e. ('S e.)		It is. (Yes.)
Chan eil.	Is not. (No.)	Chan e.		It is not. (No.)

I highlighted in bold the parts of each verb. You are probably wondering what the ☁ are in the 'Is' verb. Those are not written - I wanted to highlight a quirk of the 'Is' verb. The dependent part of the verb is missing one of its parts! Specifically, the actual verb part, as 'Cha(n)', 'An', and 'Nach' are recyclable parts used in all dependent forms of verbs at the beginning of a sentence. I like to say the missing parts are there, floating on a cloud, meaning they are there in spirit if not represented by letters.

A simple use of the 'Is' verb is to ask about identity. A simple (possibly abrupt) way of finding out someone's name uses the emphatic pronouns:

Cò mise?	Who am I? (not particularly useful except in philosophy and cases of amnesia)
Cò thusa?	Who are you? (informal, singular)
Cò esan?	Who is he?
Cò ise?	Who is she?
Cò sinne?	Who are we? (another useful philosophical question)
Cò sibhse?	Who are you? (plural, polite)
Cò iadsan?	Who are they?

Possible responses:

Is mise Goraidh.

I am Geoff, although it would be better if you used your own name, unless you are also named Geoff (or similar).

Is esan Seumas.

He is James.

Is ise Anna.

She is Ann.

Is sibhse na h-oileanaich.

You (plural) are the students.

Is iadsan na tìdsearan.

They are the teachers.

Cha mhise an t-oileanach, is mise an tìdsear. I am not the student, I am the teacher.

Chan iadsan Seumas agus Anna, is iadsan Goraidh agus Eòsaph.

They are not James and Ann, they are Geoff and Joseph.

So the whole paradigm:

Is mise Goraidh.	Cha mhise Goraidh.	Am mise Goraidh?	Nach mise Goraidh?
Is tusa Goraidh.	Cha tusa Goraidh.	An tusa Goraidh?	Nach tusa Goraidh?
Is esan Goraidh.	Chan esan Goraidh.	An esan Goraidh?	Nach esan Goraidh?
Is ise Anna.	Chan ise Anna.	An ise Anna?	Nach ise Anna?
Is sinne an clas.	Cha sinne an clas.	An sinne an clas?	Nach sinne an clas?
Is sibhse Goraidh.	Cha sibhse Goraidh.	An sibhse Goraidh?	Nach sibhse Goraidh?
Is iadsan na tìdsearan.	Chan iadsan na tìdsearan.	An iadsan na tìdsearan?	Nach iadsan na tìdsearan?

Note: When answering the question forms above, use unemphatic pronouns.

An sibhse Goraidh?	'S mi. (Yes) ('S mi is a fun sound to make.)	Cha mhì. (No)
An tusa Goraidh?	'S mi. (Yes)	Cha mhì. (No)
An esan Goraidh?	'S e. (Yes)	Chan e. (No)
An ise Anna?	'S i. (Yes)	Chan i. (No)
An sinne an clas?	'S sinn. (Yes)	Cha sinn. (No)
An iadsan na tìdsearan?	'S iad. (Yes)	Chan iad. (No)

Extra Credit

Now what if instead of using a pronoun for the subject of the sentence, we use a definite noun (something that uses 'the' before it, or 'my', 'your', etc., or a proper name) then we do the following:

Is e Goraidh an tìdsear.	Geoff is the teacher.
An ☁ e Goraidh an tìdsear?	Is Geoff the teacher?
Chan ☁ e Goraidh an tìdsear.	Geoff is not the teacher?
Nach ☁ e Goraidh an tìdsear?	Isn't Geoff the teacher?

So it is the addition of the 'e' in 'Is e', 'An e', 'Chan e' and 'Nach e' which allows use to move away from pronouns as subjects. Note that the 'e' is always 'e'. It never changes, regardless of gender or number. I think of it as a philosophical 'it' - it is not making reference to anything in particular. Just always use 'e' there and you'll be fine.