

Locating the subject in Old Irish



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Overview

1. Introduction
2. Subject properties
3. Problems for Old Irish
4. Reflexivisation
5. Infinitives (control, raising)
6. Relative clauses
7. Conclusion

Subject properties

Coding Properties:

- Nominative case
- Agreement
- Position

Behavioural Properties:

- Reflexivisation
- Coreferent deletion in conjoined clauses
- Subject-to-subject raising
- Subject-to-object raising
- Omission in control infinitives
- Relativisation

Oblique subject-like arguments

in-doich *epert* *det-siu*
COP.INT-likely saying.NOM **to.you.DAT-EMPH.2SG**
'is it likely that you would say?' (Wb. 5b29)

is-cíth *linn* *etarscarad* *coirp* *et-anme*
COP-weary **with.us.ACC** separation.NOM body.GEN et-soul.GEN
'We find the separation of body and soul weary.' (Wb. 15c12)

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Word order

beoigidir in-spirut in-corp in-fect-so
vivifies.3SG the-spirit.NOM the-body.ACC the-time.ACC-this
'The spirit now quickens the body' (Wb. 13d7)

Word order

Cleft Constructions

is-**tri-chretim** iesu christi is-fírian cách
COP-through-belief.ACC Jesus.GEN Christ.GEN COP-righteous.NOM everyone.NOM
'It is through belief in Jesus Christ that everyone is righteous' (Wb. 2b6)

it-**hé-sidi** as-m-ber sís
COP.3PL-they-EMPH.PL PV-REL-say.3SG below
'These are the things which he mentions below' (Wb. 10b13)

Word order

Infix object pronoun:

ro-s-pridach ro-s-comalnastar ro-s-dánigestar dún

PV-them-preached PV-them-fulfilled PV-them-granted to.us.DAT

‘he has preached them, he has fulfilled them, he has granted them to us’ (Wb. 21b9)

Relative clause

is-ferr lim-sa didiu **aní** **tairci** in-bríg

is-better with.me-EMPH then that.NOM produces.3SG.REL the-privilege.ACC

móir sin duib-si

big.ACC DEM to.you-EMPH

‘I prefer, then, that which produces that great privilege to you’ (Wb. 12c31)

Word order

Seven potential motivations for non-VSO word order:

- relative clauses
- stylistic variation
- heavy noun phrases
- verbal noun is the subject or object of the clause
- emphasis
- reintroduction of previously mentioned character
- change of focus

(MacGiolla Easpaig 1980)

Word order

Ferais fāelti móir friu **Blathnath** **ingen**
pour.PRET.3SG joy great to.them Blathnath.NOM girl.NOM

Mind **ben** **Con** **Roí** **maic** **Dāiri**
Mend.GEN wife.NOM Cú Roí.GEN son.GEN Dáire.GEN

‘Blathnath daughter of Mend wife of Cú Roí mac Dáire bade them welcome.’

(Mac Giolla Easpaig 1980: 29)

Subject properties

Coding Properties:

- X Nominative case
- X Agreement
- ✓ Position

(Cf. Le Mair et al. Forthcoming. 'Position as a Behavioral Property of Subjects: The Case of Old Irish.')

Behavioural Properties:

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The Old Irish material

- Orthography obscures some grammatical information
- Manuscript sources:
 - Later manuscripts: influence from later language
 - Contemporary manuscripts: notes and commentary on Latin material: potential Latin influence

Reflexivisation

- Old Irish has no separate reflexive pronouns.
- *Féin* 'self' is inflected for person and gender, but not for case, and can be bound by subjects, objects and complements.
- Pronominal constructions can refer to either the subject or the object of a sentence.

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Infinitives

- Old Irish has no morphological infinitives.
- Verbal nouns are used in situations where other IE languages would use an infinitive.
- Is the verbal noun in those cases an infinitive?

Infinitives

- “A verbal abstract is an infinitive if it is predicate of the sentence, either in the main clause or in one which is subordinate.”
- “If the subject behaves as a subordinate infinitive subject does in languages with a morphologically separate infinitive, the verbal abstract in question is infinitival.”
- Properties of subjects in infinitival clauses:
 - Coreferent deletion
 - Overt subject
 - Raising

(Disterheft 1980: 18)



Infinitives

- Control: subject of an infinitive can be deleted under identity of subject of the main clause.
- But: not every control construction is an infinitival construction.

Die Kommission forderte den jungen Mann zur Bewerbung auf.

(Example from Stüber 2009: 31, cf. Haspelmath 1997: 69)

Infinitives

con-icimm *dígail* *et cosc* *neich*
is.able.1SG punish.VN.ACC et reprimand.VN.ACC anyone.GEN
'I am able to punish and reprimand anyone' (Wb. 20d6)

nī epur frib *etarscarad* *fri suidiu*
NEG says.1SG to.you.ACC separation.VN.ACC from them.ACC
'I do not tell you to separate from them' (Wb. 9b19)

Infinitives

cia do-menad *nech* *a buith* *ō* *tu*
if thinks.PAST.SUBJ.3SG anyone.NOM **its** be.VN.ACC from *tu*
'If anyone thinks it is from *tu*' (Sg. 207b4)

(Cf. Noonan 2007: 67)

Infinitives

it hē ata chōrai do buith
COP.3PL they COP.3PL.REL right.NOM.PL to be.VN.DAT

i foitsiu thaige rīg.
in right part.DAT house.GEN king.GEN

‘it is they who are [the] right [people] to be in the right part of the king’s house’

(CIH 570.18)

Infinitives

Uisse *in* *boill* *do* *āss* *ón* *chiunn*
proper.NOM.SG the member.NOM.PL to grow.VN.DAT from.the head.DAT
‘[it is] proper for the members to grow from the head’ (Wb. 22a17)

Infinitives

- All examples of raising in Old Irish occur in constructions of *do* + VN
- Are those real infinitives? (Stüber 2009)

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Relativisation

- Old Irish has no inflected relative pronouns
- “[Old] Irish has a relative particle in one construction only: where a preposition is required to express the relation of the antecedent to the remainder of the relative clause.” (GOI §492)
- This particle is invariable in gender, number and case

Relativisation

- Other forms of relativity expressed in a variety of ways:
 - 3rd person endings of simple verbs: special relative forms
 - Leniting relative clause
 - Nasalising relative clause

(Lenition and nasalisation are originally sandhi phenomena that have become grammaticalised in Old Irish)

Relativisation

- The use of leniting relative clauses is “*obligatory* where the antecedent is felt as the subject and *optional* where it is felt as the object of the relative clause.” (GOI §494)
- If the antecedent is the *object* of the relative clause, a nasalising relative clause may also be used.

Relativisation

*In fer ad·**chí** a mac*

‘the man who sees his son’ or ‘the man whom his son sees’

*In fer ad·**cí** a mac*

‘the man whom his son sees’

(Examples from McCone 2005: 98)

Relativisation

1. Object antecedent with leniting or nasalising relative clause: regularity?
2. Characteristics of object antecedents with nasalising relative clauses.
3. Ambiguity: when allowed to stand, when resolved by means of a nasalising relative clause?
4. Subjects and objects, or nominatives and accusatives?

Conclusion

- Most reliable subject tests coding and behavioural properties
- For oblique subject-like arguments, case marking and agreement do not apply
- Word order is promising
- Further research required to ascertain subject behavior with reflexive pronouns
- Generally accepted, clear-cut distinction between the verbal noun's nominal and infinitival uses has not yet been made.
- Further research required to determine distinctions between subject and object antecedents in relative clauses
- Various potentially fruitful avenues to explore subjecthood in Old Irish

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