The History of Irish in a Typological Perspective

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THE PURPOSE of this paper[1] is to give general linguists with an interest in language typology a few concrete examples of how a particular language works in this perspective. In other words, this paper will not set out to try to make many theoretical points; instead it will concentrate on providing potential makers of such points with a few hopefully reasonably useful pieces of material to work with The fact that the particular language in question is one with an unmarked work order not usually found in other European languages may add to its attractions for the audience of this gathering. The order in question is V[erb] S[ubject] O[bject] and our first example[2] will show neatly how it works in Classical Old Irish:

> 1. *beoigidir in spirut in corp in fecht so* 'the spirit now quickens the body' (1980:107)

I have chosen this example because the subject *in spirut* and the object *in corp* are obvious loan-words from Latin and therefore very easy to identify. Also note the pronunciation **/in gorp/** of *in corp*. This illustrates a very special feature of Irish, which is that of the initial mutations, in this case that particular mutation which is called eclipsis or nasalisation (cp. Thurneysen 1946:147) and serves, among other things to mark an object noun after a definite article. Here the Old Irish spelling ignores the mutation, but we know that the actual pronunciation did not.

Then we may pass to the second example, which illustrates a few other features of Irish word order:

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[1]I am grateful to Sfle Mhic Dhonncha for most valuable help with preparing it for publication.

[2]I have taken the examples from previously published work, which (for the sake of brevity) I list by year only in what follows: the articles listed in the Bibliography should be consulted in case philologically speaking more precise references to Old Irish texts and manuscripts may be required.

2. *fo bésad fir trebuir crenas tíir dia chlaind* 'after the manner of a prudent man who buys land for his children' (1977:269)

In the first two words, we find, as we should expect, that Irish is a prepositional language. Then *fir trebuir* illustrate a couple of things: *fir* means 'man's', i.e. it is the noun 'man' in the genitive case and the adjective follows, also inflected for the genitive case. The next word, *crenas,* means 'who buys' and shows that in relative construction the relative comes after the noun, so that there are no participial constructions like *ostavan ... miehen* found in the Finnish translation[3] of this whole sentence. Also, notice a most interesting feature of Irish which is that where the relative in other languages is expressed by a pronoun, a verbal ending may look after that in Irish. Thus, the ending *-s* is in fact what corresponds to English *who, that* or *which.* In the absence of the relative ending, there would have been another form, *crenaid,* that simply means 'buys'. *Tír,* then, means 'land' and is naturally in the accusative case even there happens to be no overt marker of it in this particular instance. *Dia chlaind* illustrates yet another feature of word order in the language, in that *dia* is actually a contraction of the preposition *do* 'to' and a possessive pronoun *a* 'his'. Once more, we may observe the fact that Irish is a propositional language. On the other hand, it is worth observing that possessive pronouns (unlike nouns in the genitive case) precede their nouns, which is a significant difference.

With that, we may proceed to a study of the next example:

3. *is Críst pridchimme* 'it is Christ that we preach' (1977:273)

Now this illustrates a very important fact about Irish, which is that cleft sentences are found in it and in actual fact rather frequently. It is a very significant feature of this as of other VSO languages, such the South American one described by Payne (1990) or the Polynesian one Biggs (1973) deals with. Also, we may again observe how the relative marker is incorporated in the verb itself: in *pridchimme, -e* is that which corresponds to the *-s* of *crenas* in the previous example. The little word *is* is the copula,

[3]I.e. *lapsilleen maata ostavan varovaisen miehen tapaan.*

which is naturally etymologically connected with the word which is spelt exactly the same way in English; on the other hand there is no equivalent of the dummy pronoun *it.*

> 4. *r-a·deimnigestar Día tressa cetharde* 'God has certified it by the four things' (1977:267)

Example 4 first of all again shows the verb at the very beginning of the sentence. It also exhibits a feature that is no longer present in Modern Irish: we shall see below how that works. In Old Irish, object pronouns and object nouns do not occupy the same position in the sentence. Instead, the pronominal object takes the shape of a something that is called an infixed pronoun (see further Thurneysen 1946:255-270) in Irish grammar but corresponds structurally speaking fairly neatly to the "pronom atone" of French grammar (see Chevalier & others 1964:229). In this instance the infixed pronoun is the *a* which follows the hyphen after the initial *r-*, so that this *a* may be trtanslated into English by 'it'. The *r* is not part of the verb either: it is a verbal particle[4] which makes this particular verbal form into a perfect.

The infixed pronouns can occur in other positions than with, so to speak, proper verbs. An example of this is found in example 5:

> 5. *issum écen precept ar m'étiuth* 'it is necessary for me to teach for my raiment' (1977:268)

What we are dealing with here is, if we look at *issum écen,* i.e. the first two graphic words as printed in this example, primarily that the initial one actually consists of two parts, namely the copula (cp. the first element in example 3) and an infixed pronoun, which thus corresponds to the English translation 'for me'. It has a dative sense here (cp. Thurneysen 1946:255-6) so that from the point of view of its meaning it may well be compared to a Latin phrase like *est mihi* ... Structurally speaking, the copula (with or without infixed pronoun) and what immediately follows may be described –

[4]It seems worth a footnote to remind Slavicists that it derives (etymologically speaking) from a form **pro.*

see further my (1977:267-8) remarks – as a full predicate, corresponding to the finite verbs of sentences with verbs other than the copula. Note above all that this allows one to treat both kinds of predicate: nominal (often, but not always[5] preceded by the copula) and verbal ones, as having fundamentally identical patterns of word order.

So far I have been discussing Classical Old Irish,[6] which is the language attested from about 600 to around 900 A.D. The examples given hitherto are ones from more or less normal prose, in which the normal order of words is substantially that described up to now. On the other hand, there are examples from archaic Old Irish, which exhibit a word order type very different from that dealt with above and which is SOV or at any rate[7] verb final. Example 6 gives a good example of what I have in mind:

> 6. *no-m· Choimdiu ·coíma [*no-m·choíma Coimdiu]* 'the Lord cherishes me' (1977: 108)

Here we have something often described as tmesis: in other words, part of the sentences remains at the beginning, the rest – including the main part of the verb – is left at the end. The intial part consists of the verbal particle *no,* which in grammatical works (cp. Thurneysen 1946:348) is usually described as having no meaning. However, that does not mean that it has no function. In this case its function is to introduce (or to carry) the infixed pronoun *·m,* which is the same 1st singular pronoun we have looked at in the previous example. The comes the subject and finally the verb. In

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[5]Cp. Thurneysen 1946:494, and note that it seems very intuitive to treat the omission of the copula as a case where it may be understood, rather than as a parrallel syntactic pattern with roughly the same meaning: as Thurneysen very aptly remarks, "such clauses do not, however,.constitute a separate class but are constructed exactly like those in which the copula is expressed; hence they cannot be compared with the nominal sentences of some Semitic languages."

[6]See further Thurneysen 1946:1 and 673 for the periodisation of Irish.

[7]Cp. Payne 1990:2 for some interesting parallels and note that she too tries to explain some irregularities in the language described by assuming that it had, at an earlier stage, been a verb final one.

brackets afterwards, introduced by an asterisk,[8] we may stop to ponder what the same sentence would have looked like, if constructed in accordance with the more usual rules of Classical Old Irish prose.

The archaic material has certain other interesting ways of treating syntax like this. One example is:

> 7. *is tré fír flaithimon mortlit i mórslóg no márlóchit di duíneib ·dingabar [*is tré fír flaithimon do·ingabar mortlit i mórslóg no márlóchit di duíneib]* 'it is through the justice of the ruler that great mortality from a great army or a great lightning is kept from people' (1977:270-1; 1980:108; 1984: 156)

In this one we firstly have an introductory cleft sentence – *is tré fír flaithimon* – followed by what functionally speaking may be described as the main part of the sentence, with the verb *·dingabar* at the very end. Now if we compare this with the corresponding sentence [with the asterisk: *] in ordinary prose, we may observe a morphological difference in that the two sentences clearly exhibit different morphological types in these two cases: the sentence final verb *·dingabar* is prototonic and the other one, *do·ingabar,* is deuterotonic in form.[9] In the following example we see much the same pattern at work, except that the final verb retains the same relative form in both cases:[10]

> 8. *is tré fír flaithimon cách comarbæ cona chlí ina cháemorbæ clandas [*is tré fír flaithimon (is) comarbæ cách clandas cona chlí ina cháemorbæ]* 'it is through the justice of the ruler that everyone is an heir who installs himself with his house-post into his own inheritance.(1980:109; 1984:156)

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[8]Note that it here has neither the function it usually has in historical linguistics nor that often assigned to it by transformationalists; here it simply means that the sentence has not yet been attested but seems acceptable to Old Irish scholars.

[9]Cp. Thurneysen 1946:27-9 and 351 for these two terms and further 327-8 for the SOV patterns discussed here.

[10]I have commented on this at more length elsewhere (1985a:142 and 1990:3-5).

With the next example, we proceed to Modern Irish. This example was written during the 17th century, and that means that we have moved away quite considerably from the kind of language dealt with hitherto.

> 9. *gur mharbh caor theintighe san leith thoir don Fhraingc láimh le sliabh Alpa é* ('so that lightning killed him *(= é)* in the east of France, beside the Alp mountain (1976:171)

It illustrates a rather interesting feature of Modern Irish syntax, that has to do with the position of object pronouns. As this shows, Modern Irish no longer uses infixed pronouns to denote objective ones. Instead, there is an independent stressed pronoun which has the peculiarity that it usually but not entirely regularly is found at the end of the sentence. It is a feature that has interested linguists. Siewierska, for instance, has had (1988:36) this to say about it:

> And in Irish (McCloskey 1983[:10-1]), a VSO language, while nominal objects may in a variety of circumstances appear to the right of prepositional phrases or adverbials, pronominal objects (other than in the possessive construction) are normally clause final.

This is quite so, as far it goes, but unfortunately McCloskey himself actually has little to say about the matter in the article Siewierska refers to. He starts (1983:10) as follows:

> The order of objects with respect to other elements of the clause is a little freer than is that of subjects. Under a variety of circumstances, objects may appear to the right of prepositional phrases. Clausal objects, for instance, and 'heavy' NP objects normally appear clause-finally.

In a a reasonably helpful fashion, he gives some quite relevant examples of this "a little freer" word order, but about object pronouns, he merely (1983:11) has this:

> More surprisingly, perhaps, pronominal objects normally appear clause-finally:
>
> (6) *thug sé dom inné é*
> gave he to-me yesterday it

However, explanations have been proposed for this syntactic trait. Stenson, for instance, has: attempted (1981:45) to do so, as follows:

> One possible explanation for the final position of direct and indirect object pronouns may lie in the need to keep the relatively important semantic content of the phonologically small constituents from being buried and lost in the middle of the sentence by giving them this more prominent position at the end.

This might at first sight seem quite plausible, but even if it does, one may very well wonder why other European languages do not behave in a like fashion, since semantic or functional reasons like the ones just mentioned would of course apply fairly equally in different languages, irrespective of genetic or historical considerations, as long as similar environments are encountered, in respect of conditions like "phonologically small constituents". In this particular case, however, it seems to me by far easiest to look at this in a historical fashion. In Middle Irish,[11] one still finds the infixed pronoun that I mentioned earlier, but at the same time it may quite often[12] be reinforced by an independent pronoun at the end of the sentence, as in:

> 10. *do-s·ber diabul fo smacht iat* 'le diable les met en son pouvoir, eux' (1976:175)

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[11]Which may be dated from roughly 900 to sometime about 1200.

[12]See my (especially 1976, but also 1985) articles for further examples, including cases where the pronoun is subject and ones where the verb is a passive or impersonal one.

The pattern here is clear: the verb is there at the very beginning, with a clearly infixed pronoun: *-s-* 'them', reinforced, at the very end of the sentence, by an independent pronoun *iat,* which naturally has the meaning: compare the French equivalents *les* and *eux* in my translation, above. In English, it is less easy to translate this sort of thing literally.

Finally, having argued firmly against one admittedly rather tentative conclusion of Stenson's, I should to end this paper by stating how much I agree with her when she (1981:29) states that:

> There is no evidence whatsoever for the syntactic category verb phrase in Irish. Verb and object are rarely contiguous.

Those last six words are quite crucial to the issue: in fact they state all that really (as it currently seems to me) needs saying about this particular matter.

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