Anders Ahlqvist

A Syntactic Similarity between Finnish and Irish

Abstract

Although they are of course unrelated languages, Finnish and Irish resemble each other in that they both have a category of verbal morphology that allows for notional subjects to be left unexpressed, even if they are still felt to exist. As a result, agent constructions are avoided. However, older stages of both have some examples of agent constructions. After the establishment of the standard literary Finnish language, overt agents soon disappeared, whereas in Irish they still linger on. The reason for this has to be sought in the very different sociolinguistic conditions: in the case of Finnish, it has been much easier to avoid outside influence, whereas in this regard Irish is rather less well protected.

1.   Introduction

This article aims at illustrating a syntactic similarity between Finnish and Irish, which are two unrelated languages. At the outset, I must stress that there is no question of implying any links between them, other than typological. For the sake of convenience, I shall for the most part use the terms used by Finnish and Irish grammarians respectively, namely 'passive' and 'autonomous' to describe the verbal morphology involved. However, it must be borne in mind that other terms, notably 'impersonal', are also found; some of these may at times be found to be more adequate.

2.   Finnish

In Finnish grammar, the term passive is used to describe a number of different kinds of morphological patterns. Here I shall restrict myself to dealing with what a recent comprehensive grammar (Hakulinen & al. 2004: 1254) describes as the 'one-person passive' that has 'no overt subject'.[1]

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[1] 'Yksipersoonaisessa passiivilauseessa ei ole ilmisubjektia'.

The following two examples (Hakulinen & al. 2004: 1259) illustrate the difference between a passive and an active construction:

(1) *Heidät vietiin   sairaalaan*
     Them   was-taken to-hospital
     'They were taken to hospital'

(2) *He   joutuivat   sairaalaan*
     They ended-up   to-hospital
     'They ended up in hospital'

There are two crucial differences between (1) and (2). Firstly, the passive verb in (1) has only one form, regardless of the number of an argument such as *heidät*. Secondly, *heidät* is in the accusative, marking it is an object. On the other hand, the 3rd plural verbal ending -*vat* in (2) is there because the subject *he* is a nominative plural.

An important feature of the passive in modern standard Finnish is that no agent is found with it, as is implicit from its above definition, as a form without an overt subject. In older Finnish, however, this can happen; this is doubtless due to influence from languages like Latin, German and Swedish. Itkonen-Kaila (1992) has provided an excellent description of how such agents gradually ceased being used in Finnish Bible translations. The sentence given in the title of her paper is a good example: [2]

(3) *Ja   Jerusalem pite tallattaman   Pacanoilda*
     And Jerusalem will be-oppressed from-Pagans
     'And Jerusalem shall be trodden down by the Gentiles'

As the process of making Finnish into the fully-fledged language it now is gathered momentum towards the latter part of the nineteenth century, grammarians turned their attention to matters like this. Jahnsson (1871: 75) contributed some particularly useful remarks to this discussion,[3] as follows:

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[2] In this example (Luke 21. 24), the ending -*lda* (corresponding to modern Finnish -*lta*) is that of the ablative, and thus literally means the same as the Latin preposition *a, ab*, German *von* and Swedish *av*, all of which are frequently used to denote an agent in these languages. See further Itkonen-Kaila's comments (1992: 153) about how the passage has been translated in later translations of the Bible.

[3] For which see Itkonen-Kaila 1992: 151, who supplies a number of useful references.

> Although rendering the agent with an ablative is against the nature of the Finnish language, such a construction has nevertheless begun to be used. In all cases it ought to be used sparingly and must always be avoided, when a misunderstanding of the meaning of the sentence would arise. Thus one never says: *raha vietiin varkaalta* to mean that the thief took the money, but the sentence must be expressed with the active: *varas vei rahan.*[4]

In current Finnish, *raha vietiin varkaalta* (money was-taken thief-from) is a perfectly well-formed sentence that can mean one thing only: 'the money was taken from the thief'. In other words, in this case the ablative ending -*lta* has its basic meaning 'from'. This shows reasonably clearly that the passive + agent construction is no longer a feature of Finnish.

3. Irish

Modern Irish grammars usually quote the term 'autonomous' to describe the Irish equivalent of the Finnish passive. A concise Irish grammar in English (Ó hAnluain 1980: 94) describes it in the following terms:

> The Autonomous Form of a verb expresses the verbal action only, without any mention of the agent (the subject), or any indication of person or number:—
>
> **Briseadh** an fhuinneog (*the window was broken*).[5]

This grammar was based on a rather more extensive one, published in Irish. Its latest edition (Ó hAnluain 1999: 140) contains this piece of information:

> The autonomous [literally "free"] verb. (…) When no subject is mentioned, the form that is called the free verb is used

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[4] My translation. The Swedish original is: 'Ehuru återgifvandet af **agenten** med ablativus strider mot finska språkets natur, har man likväl börjat använda en sådan konstruktion. I alla händelser bör den sparsamt brukas och måste alltid undvikas, der något missförstånd af satsens betydelse skulle uppkomma. Man säger sålunda aldrig: *raha vietiin varkaalta* i den betydelse att tjufven tog penningen, utan satsen måste då uttryckas aktivt: *varas vei rahan.*' I wish to express my very sincere gratitude to Aila Heikinheimo-Lindholm for making the privately produced 2000 reprint of Jahnsson's grammar available to me. See further Hovdhaugen & al. (2000: 204) and Karlsson (2000: 31 and passim) concerning this work's proper place in the history of Finnish grammar.

[5] Emphasis and italics in all the quotations are original.

and further (Ó hAnluain 1999: 166):

> Often the transitive autonomous verb corresponds to the passive voice that exists in other languages: (…) *deisíodh an rothar* ('the bicycle was fixed')[6]

Some earlier grammarians have also looked at the autonomous form. Thus, Ua Laoghaire (1900: 472) insists that, in sentences containing autonomous verbal forms,

> (…) the personal agent is not *defined*. An implied personal agent is fully conveyed from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the listener. This undefined personal *agent* is the *subject* of the sentence, "*buailfear an gadhar*" ['one-beats the dog'].

He also notes that a noun accompanying such a verb is in the 'objective case'; in other words, the overt argument belonging to an autonomous verb is an object. Fenton (1900: 490) makes this even more explicit, citing as he does the fact that autonomous verbal forms in Irish 'take the accusative forms of the pronoun after them'. To this it is now relevant to add that the word-order pattern of object pronouns in Modern Irish also supports this analysis, as in this example:[7]

(4) *rugadh   agus tógadh   sa   gcómharsanacht é*
     was-born   and   was-brought-up in-the   neighbourhood   him
     'He was born and brought up in the neighboorhood'

It is important to note that unlike nouns, pronouns are marked for case morphologically too. Thus, the nominative equivalent of *é* 'him' is *sé* 'he' (cp. Ó hAnluain 1980: 82), as in:[8]

(5) *chuir sé lé sgoil   é*
     sent   he to school   him
     'he sent him to school'

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[6] My translations; the originals are: **An Saorbhriathar**. (…) Nuair nach luaitear aon ainmní úsáidtear foirm ar a dtugtar an saorbhriathar
and:
Is minic a fhreagraíonn an saorbhriathar aistreach don fhaí chéasta atá i dteangacha eile: (…)

[7] From Ahlqvist (1976: 172), in which article I have discussed the emergence, as an accusative marker, of the final position of Modern Irish personal pronouns.

[8] See Ahlqvist (1976: 171) for exact references and further examples.

Together, (4) and (5) demonstrate that the argument of an autonomous verbal form is indeed to be analysed an object.

Greene (1966: 50) has provided a lucid and succinct general description of the autonomous forms in Modern Irish:

> All tenses of the verb, however, have an impersonal form usually called in Irish grammars the *autonomous*, which often corresponds to an Irish passive, though its more exact equivalent can be found in French and German constructions with *on* and *man* respectively; *briseadh an fhuinneog* means 'the window was broken (by somebody or something)'.

Thus, there is ample corroboration from various sources for the view that autonomous forms of the verb imply some sort of subject anyway. The obvious very simple implication has to be that an additional notional subject—in the shape of an agent—is difficult to accommodate. Like in Finland, grammarians' warnings against such usages exist. Thus, an influential early 20th-century lexicographer has this to say:

> When the tense of the verb expressing the action is simply stated with (…) a verbal (...) *ag* is not used. Thus we do not say *ithtear agam é*, it is being eaten by me; there are some exceptions in *poet.* as *do smaoineadh agam*, I resolved on, it was determined on by me; (Dinneen 1927: 10).

Nevertheless, there are some occurrences in prose too, especially in fairly formal language, as in this paragraph (Ó Cearúil 1999: 732, and cf. comments 457) of the Irish constitution:

(6) *Is   ag   an   Uachtarán   a   cheapfar   an   tArd-Aighne* (…)
    it-is by   the   President   that will-be-appointed the Attorney-General
    'The Attorney General shall be appointed by the President …'

Moreover, it is quite clear that, since the Old Irish period, there have been some major changes concerning the syntax and morphology of the verbal forms from which the modern autonomous form has evolved. Two eighth-century examples (Stokes and Strachan 1901: 591; 640) will illustrate this:

(7) *amal no-n·nertar-ni*   *ho   dia*
    as   vp.-us-is-strengthened-ourselves   from God
    'as we are strengthened by God''

(8) *coscitir   ind fir*
      are-corrected the   men
      'the husbands are corrected'

In Old Irish grammar the term 'passive' is used (cp. Thurneysen 1946: 328; 349–350 and 367–370). The main points[9] to be noted are, in (7), the infixed pronoun *-n·* and the agent *ho dia*, and, in (8), the special plural ending *-tir* of *coscitir* (the singular would have *-thir*) and the nominative plural *fir* (the accusative is *firu*). The agent, and the argument in the nominative, point towards a passive syntax quite different from that of Modern Irish. On the other hand, the infixed pronoun, being an object marker with non-passive verbs, is more in line with an impersonal verb analysis.[10]

4.   Conclusion

The syntactic similarities between the two languages are obvious enough. Both have verbal forms without overt subjects; the overt argument of these verbs must be analysed as an object. Also, concomitantly, they are resistant to the use of agents. The reason for that could very likely be formalised quite easily. Simplifying the matter very significantly, one may state that it is too much for one verb to have two notional subject-type arguments.

In both cases, however, the avoidance of agents is not complete. In the earlier stages of the Finnish literary language, from Mikael Agricola's mid-sixteenth-century translation of the New Testament onwards, the construction does occur, and still did so until the second half of the nineteenth century. It is also entirely clear that its introduction is due entirely to influence from other languages.

The Irish case is less clear-cut. During its long history as a literary language, Irish has of course been influenced by many other languages,

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[9] For clarity's sake, I have added a few spaces and some punctuation not found in the Stokes-Strachan edition nor in the manuscript. Also, 'vp.' refers to a verbal particle used to support the 1st plural infixed pronoun *-n·*, which is reinforced by the emphasizing pronoun *-ni* (on all these points, see Thurneysen 1946: 24–25; 348; 255–266 and 252–253).

[10] However, it is worth noting (see Thurneysen 1946: 349) that if a passive verb's pronominal argument is in the 3rd person singular or plural, the verbal ending is enough to denote this. Therefore, the use of infixed pronouns in the two other persons may be an innovation.

notably Latin (in the Middle Ages) and English (especially during the last few centuries). However, even if the possibility is there, it cannot be proven that the Old Irish passive + agent is there because of Latin influence. There are too many other factors that contribute to making it different from its equivalents in Finnish and Modern Irish. On the other hand, its occurrence in current Irish can, to my mind at any rate, only be attributed to influence from English.

A final remark draws attention to the sociolinguistic environment of the two languages. During much of the past hundred and fifty years, Finnish has retained a fairly large core of monoglot native speakers, whose intuitions have been taken very seriously by language planners. In Ireland, on the other hand, this has been the case to a rather less significant degree. Perhaps the somewhat easier acceptance of foreign-influenced syntactic patterns in Irish can be related to the larger number of Irish-speakers who are equally (or even more?) fluent in the language the patterns in question emanate from.

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Contact information:

Anders Ahlqvist
Bergmansgatan 7 C 14[b]
FI-00140 Helsingfors
Ahlqvist(at)mac(dot)com
ahlqvist(at)nuigalway(dot)ie