

Motivating the loss of V-to-C movement in Old Irish

Glenda Newton, University of Cambridge

Like the majority of the Insular Celtic languages, Old Irish has unmarked verb-initial word order (1). In addition, Old Irish also has a double system of verbal inflection, whereby the verb's ending depends on its position in the clause. When in absolute initial position the verb has absolute endings (2). When preceded by a conjunct particle (i.e. a negative or interrogative particle or a conjunction) the verb has conjunct endings (3).

Carnie, Harley & Pyatt (2000 – CHP) propose that absolute morphology is linked to verb movement to C. They argue that Old Irish has a filled C condition. Following Chung & McCloskey (1987), CHP assume that conjunct particles are complementizers and so are merged in the C position. When a conjunct particle is merged in C, C is filled so the verb moves only as far as T and has conjunct endings. When there is no conjunct particle, the verb must move to fill C. As a result of this movement to C the verb has absolute endings.

Modern Irish has no V-to-C movement (McCloskey 1996) and no absolute/conjunct distinction. Moreover, the verbal inflections that exist in Modern Irish developed in the most part from conjunct rather than absolute endings. It seems likely, then, that the loss of V-to-C movement and the loss of absolute verbal morphology are linked.

It is often argued that the loss of verbal inflections causes the loss of verb movement (see Roberts 1993 on the loss of V-to-T movement in English). However, the link between morphology and verb movement is not clear (cf. Bobaljik 2001). Moreover, there is evidence suggesting that V-to-C movement was lost in Irish well before the loss of absolute morphology. Newton (2006) argues that V-to-C movement was lost before the Classical Old Irish period, whereas absolute endings survive into Early Modern Irish. The morphological motivation for the loss of V-to-C movement does not seem plausible in this case.

A further commonly cited motivation for the loss of V-to-C movement is the loss of verb-second (see Roberts 1993 for French, English; Willis 1998 for Welsh). Doherty (2000) argues, based on examples such as (4), that Old Irish also went through a V2 stage. However, the Archaic Irish data, on which Doherty relies, seem to show many examples of V3, such as (5), which cannot be accounted for by a V2 grammar. It seems unlikely then the loss of V-to-C movement in Old Irish was a result of the loss of V2.

A third option is that the loss of V-to-C movement resulted from a change in the distribution of clitic pronouns. Old Irish has second position clitics that appear between the conjunct particle in C and the verb in T. If, following Kayne (1991), object clitics have a set position in the clause then the position of the verb relative to the clitic pronouns could provide evidence for the acquisition of verb movement. If the child encounters sufficient examples of verb-clitic order V-to-C movement will be acquired. If not, V-to-C movement will be lost.

Clitics in Old Irish can appear suffixed to the verb (6). However, this is restricted to third person verbs and third person pronouns (Thurneysen 1946). In all other persons, the dummy particle *no* (cognate with the Hittite connective *nu*, German *nun* 'now') is inserted to host the clitic (7). Evidence from earlier stages of the language and the use of pronouns of all persons with *taith* 'be' to express possession suggest that suffixed pronouns were previously more productive. It is proposed here that in pre-Old Irish *no*+infix and verb+suffix were optional variants. An increase in the frequency of *no*-infixation led to a decrease in frequency of suffixed pronouns resulting in the loss of the evidence for V-to-C movement. This, in turn, led to the loss of absolute inflection.

- (1) *béoigidir in spirut in corp in fect so*
 vivifies.PRES.3SG the spirit the body the time this
 ‘The spirit vivifies the body now’ (Wb 13d7)
- (2) *le icid-som cloich asa tailm*
 release.PRES.3SG.ABS-emph.part.3SG.M stone out-of-his sling
 ‘He releases a stone out of his sling...’ (LU 6210–6211)
- (3) *cenid leci in metur...*
 although.NEG allow.PRES.3SG.CONJ the metre...
 ‘Although the metre does not allow...’ (Ml 30a10)
- (4) *Lugaid Luath loisc trebthu tre n tuath*
 Lugaid swift burn.PRET.3SG.CONJ dwellings strong people
 ‘Lugaid the Swift burned the dwellings of the strong people’ (Corp Gen 5)
- (5) *Mortlithi ma rlo chet di doi nib dingbatar*
 Great.plagues great.lightnings from people keep.PRET.PASS.PL.CONJ
 ‘Great plagues and great lightnings are kept from the people’ (AM §12)
- (6) *beirth-i*
 carry.3SG.ABS-SUFF.3SG.M
 ‘He carries it’ (Ml 42b7)
- (7) *no-m isligur*
 PRT-INF.1SG abase.PRES.1SG.CONJ
 ‘I abase myself’ (Wb 17d22)

References

- Bobaljik, J. (2001). The implications of rich agreement: Why morphology does not drive syntax. *WCCFL 20 Proceedings* 82–95
- Carnie, A., H. Harley and E. Pyatt (2000). VSO order as raising out of IP? Some evidence from Old Irish. A. Carnie & E. Guilfoyle (eds.), *The syntax of verb-initial languages*. Oxford University Press, New York, 39–59.
- Chung, S. & J. McCloskey (1987). Government, barriers and small clauses in Modern Irish. *Linguistic Inquiry* 18, 173–237.
- Doherty, C. (2000). Residual verb second in Early Irish: On the nature of Bergin’s Construction. *Diachronica* 17 5–38.
- Kayne, R. (1991). Romance clitics, verb movement and PRO. *Linguistic Inquiry* 33: 409–442.
- McCloskey, J. (1996). On the Scope of Verb Movement in Irish. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 14, 47–104.
- Newton, G. (2006) *The development and loss of the Old Irish double system of verbal inflection* Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge.
- Roberts, I. (1993). *Verbs and diachronic syntax: a comparative history of English and French*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Thurneysen, R. (1946). *A grammar of Old Irish*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.
- Willis, D. (1998). *Syntactic change in Welsh: a study of the loss of verb-second* Oxford: Clarendon Press.