

“A study of synchronic variation in Scottish Gaelic verb complementation”

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Abstract:

The linguistic situation in Scotland is a complicated issue, as three languages, namely Scottish English, Scots, and Scottish Gaelic, are spoken within its national boundaries, influencing each other in certain regions and contexts. While there is no doubt about the dialectal diversity of Scottish English and Scots, there is an ongoing debate on whether contemporary Gaelic displays dialectal diversity (Dorian, 1981 & 2014; Gillies, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1992, 2008 & 2010; Lamb, 2011; among others) or, by contrast, the formerly existing dialects have become a unified whole now (McAuley, 1982; McInnes, 2006).

On the one hand, it seems plausible to assume a greater standardization of Gaelic nowadays, mainly due to language shift and the institutionalization in broadcasting and in the education system. Thus, it is generally agreed (McLeod, 2017) that the main stronghold of the Scottish Gaelic language continues to be the Outer Hebrides and, consequently, the variety spoken in and around this area may be considered as the standard. However, on the other hand, sufficient evidence exists to claim that there are also other dialectal groups in several other Gaelic-speaking areas in the Northwest Highlands, the Isle of Skye, Argyll and Bute, or Inverness, and even in smaller Gaelic communities existing in Glasgow and Edinburgh, which have become increasingly important nowadays, as they provide the greater number of learners through formal education.

This paper intends to offer a study of verb complementation (Noonan, 2007) in Scottish Gaelic by paying attention to the variation exhibited by its speakers in different parts of the *Gàidhealtachd*. More specifically, this study, firstly, analyses the syntactic structure of the complex constructions expressing a number of semantic relations (e.g. causative, psych-action, jussive, propositional attitude, cognition, direct and indirect perception, or direct and indirect discourse) with the aim of offering a typology of verb complementation in this language. Secondly, this study offers a comparison of the way that a number of Scottish Gaelic speakers, who vary in terms of age, proficiency level, and region, express grammatically the different semantic relations, in order to examine if there is variation among the different dialects. Thus, for example, two of the semantic relations that show more divergence among the dialects are psych-action (1), as some speakers appear to prefer VO order over inverted nominals, and cognition (2), which very commonly reflects the confusion between “whether” and “if” clauses:

(1) Peter tries to make the cake= Bidh Pàdraig a’feuchainn ri a’chèic a dhèanamh. / Bidh Pàdraig a’feuchainn ri dhèanamh a’chèic./ Tha Pàdraig a’feuchainn ris an cèic a dheanamh.

(2) I don’t know if she will go there = Chan eil f(h)ios agam an tèid i ann. / Chan eil f(h)ios agam ma thèid i ann.

As a conclusion, the comparative analysis of verb complementation in samples of Scottish Gaelic taken from native speakers living in different parts of the Gaelic-speaking area in Scotland appears to show, on the one hand, that Scottish Gaelic does exhibit a high degree of convergence throughout the geographical area it is spoken, very possibly due to the strong and continuous attempts at its standardization, and, on the other hand, that it is also possible to observe instances of language change, especially in younger learners, which may reflect a possible influence of English.

Keywords: Scottish Gaelic, complementation, Role and Reference Grammar, variation

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