The interplay of syntax and stress in Old Irish: Evidence for indirect reference

The complex interplay of syntax and stress in the Old Irish (ca. 750–900 CE), in particular in the verbal complex, has long been a crux in both traditional historical studies on Celtic and Indo-European languages (e.g. Watkins 1963, Meid 1963, Cowgill 1975, McCone 1996, 2006) and in more theoretically informed linguistics (e.g. Carnie, Pyatt and Harley 1994, 2000, Adger 2001, Newton 2006). Although the evidence is primarily historical, it is descriptively quite clear and, moreover, supported by comparison with Modern Irish dialects (Thurneysen 1980). In this paper I advance an analysis of the complex situation in the Old Irish verbal complex which is in line with theories proposing that the phonology–syntax interface is mediated through phrasal prosodic constituents (e.g. Chen and Downing 2016) rather than phonological information being directly encoded in the syntactic structure.

In Old Irish stress is regularly assigned to the initial syllable of a word (Thurneysen 1980). The main exception to this general rule involves finite compound verbs (CV), containing one or more prefixes (P), when occurring in initial position in main clauses. In this case the leftmost P is unstressed but the stress falls on the verb (V), and the CV assumes a "deuterotonic" form, e.g. *do-beir* 'brings' (P-'V). In other contexts, however, the stress in CVs is on P, giving a "prototonic" form in accordance with the usual pattern, e.g. *tabair* 'brings' ('P-V). Note that Old Irish is a VSO language, finite verbs normally occurring initially in both main and embedded clauses.

It has been claimed that the exceptional deuterotonic stress of CVs in Old Irish is due to a "prosodic juncture" after an element (a complementizer, P or V) in the highest functional head (C) in the clause (Eska 1996, Carnie et al. 1994, 2000, Adger 2001, Newton 2006). However, this analysis is problematic in view of the existence of CVs exhibiting the regular prototonic stress, e.g. 3 person imperative *taibred* 'let him bring' ('P-V).

I propose that the deuterotonic stress in CVs results from the effects of enclitic Wackernagel elements (pronouns/agreement markers, particles) between P and V; crucially, this includes morphologised historical reflexes of such clitics, synchronically manifested as covert function particles (proposed in the "Particle Theory" of Cowgill 1975; cf. also Sims-Williams 1984, Schrijver 1997). Expanding on earlier suggestions (Watkins 1963, Isaac 1993), I argue that these clitics block the stress assignment on P in absolute clause-initial position.

The placement of Wackernagel clitics between P and V ("infixation", cf. e.g. Griffith 2015) would seem to violate the lexical integrity of the word (Di Sciullo and Williams 1987, Harris 2000). However, I adopt the view that a CV arises by incorporation of P into V. I assume that P is a stress neutral function word, normally incorporating as a proclitic into the host prosodic word (pword, ω) (Selkirk 1995, Green 2001). When CVs are not in absolute initial position, notably in embedded clauses, their structure is [ω('P-V)], the stress in the complex head being assigned initially according to the general rule. But when P combines with a Wackernagel element (E) in main clauses, the resulting complex P-E constitutes an affixal proclitic outside the host pword, and the entire structure of the CV is to be analyzed as a recursive pword [ω(P-E ω('V))]. Only the right-hand member of this recursive pword receives the stress. The exceptions involving prototonic imperative forms to CVs are due to the fact that they do not contain a Wackernagel element.

In conclusion, CVs in Old Irish exhibit both [ω(Clitic+Host)] and [ω(Clitic ω(Host))] structures, the former appearing as prototonic forms and the latter as deuterotonic forms. The conditions on the formation of the different structures and their respective stress assignment depend on the syntactic position of the CV and the placement of Wackernagel clitics. The analysis sustains

the predictions of indirect reference theories such as Chen and Downing (2016) that the phonology–syntax interface is mediated through constituents in the Prosodic Hierarchy rather than being directly conditioned by syntactic structure.

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