**Subject behaviour in Old Irish: word order, verbal noun clauses, and relative clauses**

In this paper, I will discuss my ongoing research into subjecthood in Old Irish, specifically focussing on potential subject tests for Old Irish. Alignment and argument structure lie at the heart of current theoretical linguistic models. Extensive work has been carried out on argument structure in modern languages, while work on the ancient and medieval Indo-European languages is beginning to take off. Keenan (1976), in his seminal work on the subject concept, developed a set of over 30 “universal” properties, with coding, behavioural, and (some more controversial) semantic properties. These properties do not apply in all languages and it has been argued that subject properties are language specific or perhaps even construction-specific.

Research on argument structure and subjecthood in the medieval Celtic languages is ongoing. Existing work in this area tends to be descriptive, historical, and comparative (Bergin, 1938; Isaac, 1993; Mac Coisdealbha, 1998; Mac Giolla Easpaig, 1980; Watkins, 1963; for an exception, see Lash, 2014a, 2014b). For the modern languages, subject tests have been determined based on the subject properties in these languages. Applying these subject to the ancient and medieval languages is however problematic and Old Irish is no exception. A specific problem for Old Irish is that several common subject tests, such as omission in control constructions and raising, depend on the presence of language-specific structures like the infinitive, which is absent from the language. In the proposed paper, then, I will identify potential subject tests for Old Irish. Specifically, I will discuss position (or word order), the possibility of applying subject tests requiring an infinitive to verbal-noun clauses, and subject behaviour in leniting and nasalising relative clauses.

**Position**

It is well known that Old Irish has VSO word order in clauses with neutral word order (Thurneysen, 1975, p. 327). Other subject positions are possible (see e.g. Lash, 2014a), although these are restricted by information structure. Old Irish is also a pro-drop language, so a subject pronoun can be left unexpressed. Objects follow the subject, although sentential adverbs may intervene between the two. Both objects and subject-like obliques may also be infixed in the verb (e.g. *ni-s·fil*, ‘they are not’), following prepositions, or suffixed to prepositions. Clauses with both nominal subjects and nominal objects are rare, but preliminary research into position as a subject test for Old Irish is promising (Le Mair, Johnson, Frotscher, Eythórsson, & Barðdal, 2017).

**Subject tests involving infinitives/verbal nouns**

Several common subject tests, such as omission in control constructions and raising, depend on the presence of language-specific structures like the infinitive. Old Irish does not have infinitives, but it does have analogous constructions, using verbal nouns. Verbal noun constructions replace constructions found in other Indo-European languages including participles, gerunds, and genuine infinitives, and in some cases appear where a finite subordinate clause might be expected. An extensive study of verbal nouns in Medieval Irish and Welsh has been undertaken by Ronan (2006).[[1]](#footnote-1) In control infinitives, the subject of the infinitive is left unexpressed under identity with the subject or the object of the preceding clause, or it may even be retrieved from the context. In the case of verbal nouns, the subject can be expressed in the genitive or with a prepositional phrase, or it can be left unexpressed.

Subject-to-object raising involves a main verb and an infinitive, where the subject of the non-finite verb behaves syntactically as the object of the finite verb. The subject of the infinitive is in the accusative when embedded under raising-to-object verbs, but the object of the infinitive behaves like it does in ordinary finite clauses. In subject-to-subject raising, the finite verb does not select for a subject of its own; instead the subject of the infinitive assumes the behaviour of the subject of the finite verb. The paper will discuss the behaviour of subjects of verbal nouns in potential control and raising constructions.

**Relative clauses**

A prospective new subject test for Medieval Irish is behaviour in relative clauses. Of most interest are leniting and nasalising relative clauses. The leniting relative clause is obligatory when the antecedent is felt as the subject of the relative clause. When the antecedent is felt as the object of the relative clause, either a leniting or a nasalising relative clause can be used (Ó hUiginn, 1986; Thurneysen, 1975, pp. 312–325). When the concept expressed in the relative clause is felt as the subject, the relative verb is always in the third person. It may be possible to identify a subject test based on the distribution of leniting and nasalising relative clauses.

Although I cannot hope to expound on all the intricacies of subjecthood and argument structure in Old Irish in a single paper, it is my aim to provide a theoretical analysis of a core aspect of syntax, investigating argument structure and the boundaries of subjecthood in Old Irish.

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1. See also Jeffers, 1978; Müller, 1999; and Stüber, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)