On the use of the Old Irish indefinite pronoun *nech ní*

In this paper, I would like to address a number of issues related to the use of the Old Irish indefinite pronoun *nech ní* in the corpus provided by the main collections of glosses attested in the contemporaneous manuscripts. Due to the quality and quantity of the involved texts, Wb (c. 160 cases) and Ml (c. 250 cases) are especially valuable in this regard; less so the Sg (c. 27 cases) evidence. The different value of these collections is much the same as in the case of the use of the neuter singular demonstrative pronouns *aní* and *a*N, which are characterized by the fact that they constitute a NP together with the relative clause which regularly follows. One of the questions which I would like to deal with in this paper is precisely the difference between the use of these (definite) demonstratives and that of the mentioned indefinite pronoun, one of whose main uses is precisely as the head of a relative clause.

The use of this indefinite pronoun has been analyzed from the point of view of its semantic uses (the functions considered by M. Haspelmath 1997, *Indefinite Pronouns*), gender, pragmatic use, syntactic context (namely, the combination with negation or an associated element, as well as the inclusion in a main or subordinate clause), syntactic function (A, S, O, oblique or genitive), as well as the presence of a relative clause depending on this indefinite pronoun (which has a NP function in this relative clause). A preliminary glance at the results of this analysis permits to advance a number of worth discussing observations:

1. The Old Irish *nech ní* apparently has a wide range of semantic uses, from the “specific known to the speaker” to the “free choice” uses, to quote the two extreme poles of the semantic map proposed by Haspelmath, so that one must say that this Old Irish indefinite pronoun possesses a remarkable quantity of functions, even for an cross-linguistically multifunctional element like this.
2. The Old Irish indefinite pronoun can be combined with both negation and a relative clause (and can also be used without any of these elements), but a certain complementary distribution of negation and relative clause can be observed.
3. A very remarkable fact which clearly calls for an explanation is the fact that the indefinite pronouns which have the function of A (agent of a transitive predicate) virtually have no relative clause (neither in Wb nor in Ml), whereas the indefinite pronouns with other functions (namely, S, O and oblique) have a relative clause in more or less the same proportion (i.e. in the half of the cases).
4. As is also the case of the previous observation, the use of the aforementioned neuter singular demonstrative pronouns *aní* and *a*N contrasts with the corresponding indefinite pronoun *ní*: whereas *aní* and *a*N most often express the combination of NP functions S – O, this combination is precisely the less frequent in the equivalent use of *ní* in both Wb and Ml.

The adduced list does not exhaust the number of observations and questions which can be put forward on the use of the Old Irish indefinite pronoun *nech ní*. However, it shows the potential of the language of the glosses for a productive investigation on the syntactic use of relevant elements and perhaps even the potential of the Old Irish linguistic evidence for general linguistic issues.