

# The Syntax of Scottish Gaelic\*

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## 1 Introduction

This chapter provides a very brief overview of some selected areas of the syntax of Scottish Gaelic (hence Gaelic), with a focus on clause structure. Excellent, more broadly-based, overviews of the descriptive syntax of Gaelic can be found in MacAulay (1992), Gillies (1993) and Lamb (2003). Adger (2010b) is a more recent overview of Gaelic syntax informed by the perspective of contemporary linguistics, while Cox (2017) provides a robust and detailed grammar.

Because of the wealth of previous descriptive work, I have attempted something different here. Gaelic uses a wide range of superficially different structures for clauses, and I have tried to show in this chapter how these can all be seen as variations on a single syntactic theme, so that, at a certain level of abstraction, there is a unity to them. This kind of analysis requires a theoretical framework and I have used a fairly straightforward phrase structure theory<sup>1</sup>, augmented with the idea that grammatical categories like tense or aspect can also project to phrasal status and provide positions in phrase

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<sup>1</sup>I assume that lexical categories like verbs, nouns and adjectives head phrases and have structural complement and specifier positions. A complement is a phrase that directly combines with a head, while a specifier is a phrase that is still inside the phrase projected by the head, but is not its complement.

structure for syntactic units (Pollock 1989). This basic theory is further augmented by the long-standing idea that there are syntactic rules that can affect elements of phrase structure (e.g. Chomsky 1965). I have tried to introduce just those concepts that are relevant to the basic analysis and to keep away, as much as possible, from theoretical technicalities.

A note on data: since Scottish Gaelic forms a dialect continuum, there is variation in what syntactic patterns speakers find acceptable; the language also varies across speaker generations, with older native speakers differing from younger native speakers in what they judge as acceptable (see Iosad and Lamb 2020, Wilson 2021 for recent discussion of both kinds of variation). The rapid growth of Gaelic media and education has also led to new kinds of stylistic variation, with the acceptability of patterns and forms varying by register (MacAulay 1982, Lamb 2008). I cannot do justice to how this variation patterns here, so I have taken the route of drawing data from the published linguistic literature, from the DASG corpus (Ó Maolalaigh 2006), from the Tobar an Dualchais recordings, from my own field notes taken over the past 20 odd years, or from examples from prose written by native speakers<sup>2</sup>. The data here is in that sense maximalist, and almost certainly doesn't represent the grammar of any particular individual.

## 2 Subject Predicate Structures

A major type of clause in Gaelic involves a subject, such as a pronoun or noun phrase, followed by a predicate phrase. This configuration is known in the linguistic literature as a 'small clause' (Stowell 1981, Safir 1983, and, most pertinently, Chung and McCloskey 1987 on Irish). This section sketches out the structure of small clauses in Gaelic and then focusses on the internal

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<sup>2</sup>Examples taken from novels are marked by an abbreviation for the novel's title and a page number/Kindle location. The abbreviations are as follows:

Title	Author	Year	Publisher	Abbr.
Cogadh Ruairidh	Iain MacLean	2009	Sandstone	CR
An Nighean air an Aiseag	Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul	2013	Luath	NAA
Taghadh de Sgeulachdan Inspeactair Rebus	Tormod MacGill-Eain and Ruairidh Mac an t-Saoir, translating Iain Rankin	2014	Grace Note	TSIR
Constabal Murdo	Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul	2018	Luath	CM1
A' Fàgail an Eilein	Mòrag Law	2021	Luath	FAE
Constabal Murdo 2	Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul	2022	Luath	CM2

structure of the predicate phrase.

## 2.1 Agus-Clauses

Small clauses appear in a number of untensed contexts. I will illustrate these via modifying clauses introduced by *agus*, usually thought of as a conjunction meaning ‘and’, but in these constructions signifying a causal or temporal connection with another clause. In (1) the predicate is an adjectival phrase (the subject is italicized and the predicate bold):

- (1) a. Ach a chaidh iompachadh, agus *e* a-nise **beò air mathanas**.  
 but C go.PST conversion, and he now alive on forgiveness  
 ‘But he was converted and now lives on forgiveness’ CM2 68
- b. agus *mise* **toilichte leis a h-uile càil sa gharadh**  
 and I happy with every thing in-the garden  
 ‘and I’m happy with everything in the garden’

In (1a), a temporal adverbial separates the subject from the predicate phrase. In (2a), where the predicate is a prepositional phrase, the subject is also separated from it by an adverbial, while (2b), shows a fairly complex prepositional phrase predicate meaning ‘out on a walk in the gardens’:

- (2) a. agus *i* gu tur **an eisimeil na teaghlaich**  
 and she completely in dependence the.GEN family.GEN  
 ‘while she (was) completely dependent on her family’ NAA 59
- b. Agus cò a choinnich rium agus *e* **a-muigh air chuairt**  
 and who REL meet.PST to.1sg and e out on walk  
**anns na gàrraidhean** ach Alasdair Siosalach.  
 in.DEF the.PL gardens but Alasdair Siosalach  
 ‘And who met me while he was out walking in the gardens but Alasdair Siosalach’ CM2 68

A common kind of small clause is one where the predicate phrase is introduced by a particle signifying aspect followed by a nominalized verb form, usually called the verbal noun (glossed here as VN), which functions as a verbal predicate. I return below to the internal structure of this.

- (3) a. agus *sruileagan beaga uisge* **a’ sileadh sìos air na**  
 and drops small water SIMP drip.VN down on the

**rèilichean.**

rails

‘while small drops of water dripped down on the rails’ FAE 42

- b. agus *e* **air fhàgail a-mach à gèam ball-coise.**  
 and he PERF 3MS-leave.VN out from game football  
 ‘while he had been left out of a football game’ TSIR 44

However, neither a simple noun phrase nor a tensed verb phrase are possible in the predicate position:

- (4) a. \*Agus *e* **Àrd-Inspeactar** a-nis.  
 and he high-inspector now  
*for* ‘as he was a Chief Inspector now’  
 b. \*Agus *e* **coisichidh/choisich/choisiceadh** ...  
 and he walk.FUT/PST/CND  
*for* ‘now, as he walked/wals/used to walk ...’

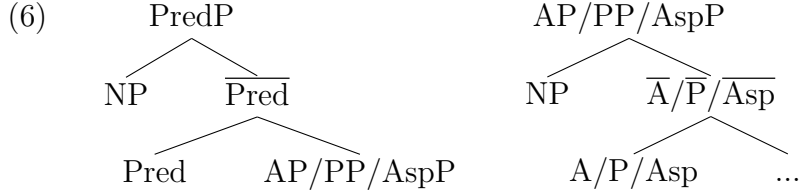
Schematically, small clauses in Gaelic look, then, as follows<sup>3</sup>:

(5)

$$\left[ \text{Noun Phrase (Adverbial)} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Adjective Phrase} \\ \text{Prepositional Phrase} \\ \text{Aspectual Phrase} \end{array} \right\} \right]_{\text{Small Clause}}$$

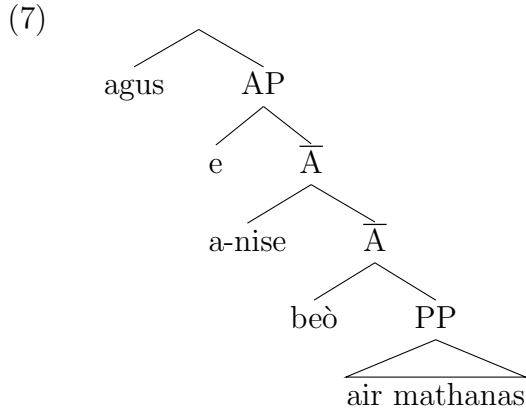
Chung and McCloskey (1987) suggest that the syntactic category of small clauses in Irish is S(entence), but more recent research has tended to take it to be either an abstract predicate category symbolized as PredP (Bowers 1993, Svenonius 1994), or simply a projection of whatever category heads the predicate (Stowell 1981)—see Citko (2011) for general overview. This gives the two following structures as alternative analyses (the bar over the category is intended to express that the phrase it labels is intermediate between a lexical item and a full phrase, Jackendoff 1977):

<sup>3</sup>I have illustrated untensed small clauses with *agus*-constructions, but they are found elsewhere in the language, including in the complements of perception verbs and in certain temporal clauses.



In both, the subject of the predication is introduced as a specifier. Intuitively specifiers are positions for subjects while complements are positions for objects. I will assume the rightmost structure in what follows for concreteness, though some of the theoretical work I draw on adopts the PredP approach.

*Agus*-clauses consist then of *agus* with a predicative complement, so (1a) has the following structure, with the adverb attached between the subject and the constituent containing the predicate:



## 2.2 Auxiliary Headed Clauses

Small clauses in Gaelic are also found in tensed clauses, preceded by the tensed auxiliary:

- (8)
- a. Tha e fhathast **fliuch**  
be.PRS it still wet  
'It is still wet.'
  - b. Bha i **air a rathad a-mach**  
be.PST she on her way out  
'She was on her way out.'
  - c. Bidh e **a' coiseachd** gach latha  
be.FUT he SIMP walk.VN every day

‘He walks every day.’

There is good evidence that the subject and predicate in a small clause form a constituent, as that unit can be conjoined:

- (9) ... bha [am fraoch air Màm Chuillich dorch a dèidh nam  
 ... be.PST the heather on Màm Chuillich dark after the.GEN  
 falaisgeirean] agus [na speuran soilleir liath chun iar-thuath] ...  
 showers and the skies clear grey to.the west-north  
 ‘the heather on Màm Chuillich was dark after the showers and the  
 clear skies were blue-grey to the North-West.’ NAA 21

It can also be omitted, as can be seen in (10), where the small clause expected after the tensed auxiliary *bheil* is elided, with its interpretation deriving from the preceding clause:

- (10) ‘Agus, a bheil Dadaidh buileach slàn a-nis?’ ... ‘Tha mi  
 and, Q be.PRS.DEP Daddy fully well now?’ ... ‘be.PRS I  
 an làn dòchas gu bheil.’  
 in full hope that be.PRS.DEP  
 ‘And is Daddy fully well now?’ ... ‘I really hope he is.’ FAE 65

The structure of auxiliary headed clauses can be understood as being similar to that of *agus*-clauses, with the small clause being a complement of a syntactic category which encodes tense and hosts the tensed auxiliary; (8b) is then analysed as (11), where we still need to determine the categorial status of the position of the auxiliary:

- (11)
- 
- ```

graph TD
    QP["?P"] --- Q["?"]
    QP --- PP["PP"]
    Q --- bha["bha"]
    PP --- i["i"]
    PP --- Pbar["P̄"]
    Pbar --- air["air"]
    Pbar --- NP["NP"]
    NP --- phrase["a rathad a-mach"]
  
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The auxiliary has four tensed forms, which have different allomorphs depending on whether they are in matrix clauses (these are traditionally called the

independent forms), embedded clauses (traditionally called dependent forms, glossed DEP), or relative clauses (relative forms, glossed REL):

|      |             | Independent | Dependent | Relative |
|------|-------------|-------------|-----------|----------|
|      | past        | bha         | robh      | bha      |
| (12) | present     | tha         | (bh)eil   | tha      |
|      | future      | bidh        | bi(dh)    | bhios    |
|      | conditional | bhiodh      | bhiodh    | bhiodh   |

Semantically, the past/present distinction can be understood as specifying how the definite time of the event or situation that the sentence describes connects to the time of the utterance of the sentence. Past tense expresses that that situation time precedes the utterance time, present that it does not.

The future/conditional ‘tenses’, however, do not relate to the utterance time directly. Rather they primarily mark the time of the situation described by the sentence as being non-specific (Gillies 1993, MacAulay 1992—MacAulay renaming these as first and second ‘indefinite’ tenses).

The distinction between future and conditional appears to relate to how directly the non-actual situation arises from the speech situation. For example, (13a) can be used when the speaker thinks that a direct extension of the current situation will result in Eilidh being there (for example, if the sentence were continued with an adverb like *a-màireach*, ‘tomorrow’), while (13b) can be used when the speaker thinks that some extra condition has to hold for Eilidh to be there, hence the typical use of this verb form in conditionals:

- (13) a. Bidh Eilidh ann.  
           be.FUT Eilidh there  
           ‘Eilidh will be there.’  
       b. Bhiodh Eilidh ann.  
           be.CND Eilidh there  
           ‘Eilidh would be there.’

Similarly, the ‘future’ (13a), with an adverb like *gach latha*, ‘every day’, can mean the equivalent of ‘Eilidh is (usually) there every day’, while the ‘conditional’ (13b) can mean ‘Eilidh used to be there (on a regular basis)’, which is again not a direct extension of the current situation. Another possible reading of these ‘tenses’ involves ability. *Nì iad sin*, using the irregular future of the verb *dèan*, ‘do’ in the future can mean ‘They can do that’, while the

conditional *Dhèanadh iad sin* can mean ‘They could do it/were able to do it’ (see MacAulay 1992 and Lamb 2003, pp.58-59 for further discussion).

If we examine regular verbs, as opposed to the auxiliary, which is suppletive, we find that the indefinite tenses can be morphologically marked by suffixation, while the definite past of regular verbs is morphologically marked by prefixation (or lenition, depending on the phonology of the verb). The vowel initial verb *òl*, ‘drink’, for example, has the following forms:

|      |             | Independent | Dependent | Relative |
|------|-------------|-------------|-----------|----------|
| (14) | past        | dh’òl       | do dh’òl  | dh’òl    |
|      | future      | òlaidh      | òl        | dh’òlas  |
|      | conditional | dh’òladh    | òladh     | dh’òladh |

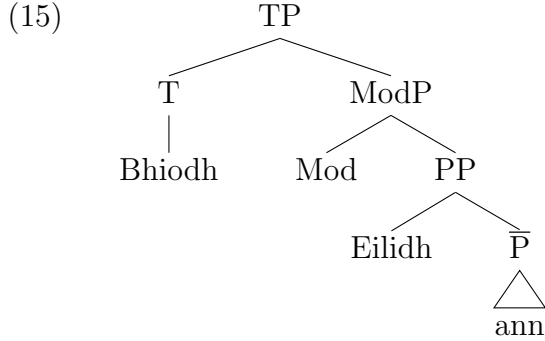
Past is marked by morphology affecting the initial part of the verb (in this case, prefixation of *dh’*, pronounced [ɣ]), while future and conditional are suffixes (*(a)idh*, pronounced [i] and *(e)adh*, pronounced [əɣ])<sup>4</sup>. The dependent and relative forms add further complexity, but the morphological distinction between what MacAulay refers to as definite vs indefinite tenses is clear.

Given there is both a semantic and a morphological distinction, I will assume that, in tensed clauses, there are two relevant categories that head phrases: T (the category that expresses past/non-past) and Mod (I use this to signify the category that expresses MacAulay’s ‘indefinite’ tenses, which are at least partly modal in nature). This brings the clause structure of Gaelic into line with much work in how grammatical categories are expressed syntactically in general, following the research tradition of ‘Cartographic syntax’ (Rizzi and Cinque 2016, for review). I will therefore take the structure of a tensed clause containing a small clause like (13b) to be as follows, where the auxiliary in T expresses grammatical features of both T and Mod. This is essentially a syntacticization of MacAulay’s insights.

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<sup>4</sup>Gaelic verbs do not express agreement, though there is a distinct suffix for the 1st singular conditional *-inn*, which replaced *i(e)adh*. This suffix does not cooccur with an overt pronoun.

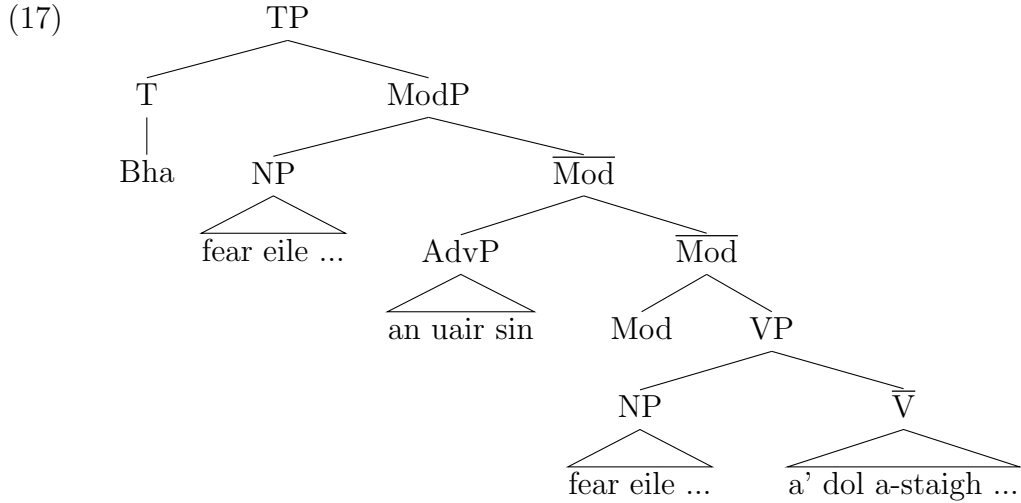




This structure provides a potential second position for the subject *Eilidh*, the specifier of ModP. There is some evidence that this is correct. Temporal adverbs, like *an uair sin*, ‘then’, may appear on either side of the subject (I have modified (16a) in (16b) to show the flexibility, and italicised and bolded the adverb and subject respectively):

- (16) a. Bha *an uair sin* **fear eile** **dhen bhuidheann** a’ dol  
 be.PST then one other of-the group SMP go.VN  
 a-staigh nad àite-sa.  
 in in-your place-EMPH  
 ‘There was then another one of the group going in in your place.’  
 Johnson (1970)
- b. Bha **fear eile** **dhen bhuidheann** *an uair sin* a’ dol  
 be.PST one other of-the group then SMP go.VN  
 a-staigh nad àite-sa.  
 in in-your place-EMPH  
 ‘Another one of the group was then going in in your place.’

If this adverbial consistently attaches to  $\overline{\text{Mod}}$ , but the subject may appear either in the specifier of the predicate, or in the specifier of Mod, we can account for this flexibility.



Of course, an alternative analysis could involve multiple positions for the adverb, as opposed to for the subject. However, McCloskey (in prep) concludes, on rather different grounds, that there are also two subject positions in Irish, and I'll assume the structure in (17) in what follows for consistency.

## 2.3 The Structure of the Predicate

Adjectival and Prepositional phrases as predicates of small clauses are fairly straightforward in Gaelic, while AspPs have a reasonably complex internal structure that is dependent on the kind of aspectual particle that heads the phrase. Nominal predicates and verbal predicates are either assimilated to an AspP structure, or involve a different basic syntax (sections 3, 4 and 5).

### 2.3.1 AP and PP predicates

AP predicates consist of an adjective, which may have a prepositional complement (or, occasionally, a genitive complement), and may be modified by an intensifier such as *glè*, 'very', *buileach*, 'fully' (cf. (10)), *fada*, 'far', etc. I give here a fairly maximal AP, where the adjective is in its comparative form:

- (18) cha bhiodh na daoine dad sam bith na b' fhaide air  
 NEG be.CND the people thing any CMP COP fond.CMP on  
 adhart.  
 forward

Prepositional phrases are also straightforward, consisting of a preposition and a nominal phrase. Prepositions in Gaelic can have a morphological effect on a following nominal phrase, causing it to alter its form to what is traditionally called the dative case (or sometimes the genitive)<sup>5</sup>:

- (19) a. Bha cupannan air a’ bhòrd  
           be.PST cups on the.DAT table  
           ‘There were cups on the table.’  
       b. Tha uisge anns a’ ghloinne  
           be.PST water in.DEF the.DAT table  
           ‘There were cups on the table.’

Ostrove (2020) and Adger (2022) argue that case in Gaelic is a morphological expression of a surface syntactic configuration as opposed to being a syntactic feature of nominals.

### 2.3.2 Aspectual Predicates

The constituent introduced by aspectual particles has a more interesting internal structure, quite distinct from that of other categories. I use the term ‘aspectual’ here in a particular sense, acknowledging that the notion of aspect covers a broad range of quite different grammatical and semantic properties across languages (Binnick 2020 for review).

There are four clear cases of these aspectual particles<sup>6</sup>: (i) *ag/a’*, which signifies that there is a direct relationship between the time of the event or situation that the verb describes and the time of utterance (I gloss this as ‘simple’ aspect, SIMP); (ii) *air*<sup>7</sup> and *gu*, which signify a non-direct relationship, with *air* expressing a recent perfect and *gu* a prospective (Adger 1996, Ramchand 1997, Reed 2012), both of these introducing a pragmatically determined reference point (Reichenbach 1966, Hornstein 1977); (iii) *ann*, which expresses the idea that the situation is thought of as a tempo-

<sup>5</sup>Some prepositions appear in a special form when they are followed by a definite nominal as in (19b); a few are complex, incorporating what were diachronically nominal elements (see Adger 2010a for discussion of the morphology of Gaelic prepositions).

<sup>6</sup>Schreiner and Carnie 2016 argue that a further complex particle *a’ dol a* should be included in the aspectual particles. I leave this aside here.

<sup>7</sup>Some dialects use *as dèidh/an dèidh* as an alternative to *air*.

rary state, as opposed to an event (Cram 1983). Syntactically, we find quite distinct internal properties for each of these.

Looking first at simple aspect, we find the following kinds of structure:

- (20) a. is solas deàlrach an fheasgair [a' dòrtadh  
 and light bright the.GEN afternoon.GEN SIMP pour.VN  
 sìos an staidhre] agus [a' lìonadh nan  
 down the stairs and SIMP fill.VN the.GEN.PL  
 trannsaichean fada balbh].  
 corridor.GEN.PL long silent  
 'and the bright light of the evening pouring down the stairs and  
 filling the long silent corridors' FAE 92
- b. Tha fhios agam fhìn cà'il a' bhròg  
 be.PRS knowledge at.1SG self where-be.PRS.DEP the shoe  
 gam ghoirteachadh.  
 SIMP.1SG hurt.VN  
 'I know myself where the shoe hurts me.' CM2 23

The intransitive verbal noun *dòrtadh* in (20a) is formed from the verb root *dòrt*, 'pour' and combines with *a'* (an allomorph of *ag* pronounced as schwa); the definite direct object of the transitive verbal noun *lìonadh*, 'fill' appears in the genitive<sup>8</sup>. The verbal noun *goirteachadh*, 'hurt' in (20b) has a pronominal object, which is marked only by inflectional morphology on the aspectual particle surfacing as the agreeing form *gam* (triggering lenition on the following verbal noun).

There is interesting evidence that the object, like the subject, has two 'positions' in phrase structure. In examples like (20b), it is possible to emphasize the pronominal object by addition of an emphatic marker. These markers are usually affixed to pronouns and agree with them, so we find the pair *mi/mise* for non-emphatic vs emphatic first person singular, or the pair *e/esan* for non-emphatic vs emphatic third person singular. Interestingly, when the emphatic suffix is added in (20b), it obligatorily appears after the verbal noun:

- (21) a. Tha a' bhròg gam ghoirteachadh-se.  
 be.PRS the shoe SIMP.1SG hurt.VN-EMPH

<sup>8</sup>Genitive forms here are somewhat variable depending on dialect and register, and are usually never marked when the object is indefinite.

- ‘I know myself where the shoe hurts me.’  
 b. \*Tha a’ bhròg gam-se ghoirteachadh.  
 be.PRS the shoe SIMP.1SG-EMPH hurt.VN  
 ‘I know myself where the shoe hurts me.’

Given that the particle attaches to a pronoun, this pattern suggests that there is a null pronoun after the verbal noun. Null pronouns are often licensed just when there is sufficiently rich agreement in the clause to identify them (Jaeggli and Safir 1989), and here the rich agreement appears on the aspectual particle. The object is, then, expressed twice in structure (Hale and McCloskey 1984 on Irish, Adger 2017b on Gaelic).

If we change the aspectual particle to the perfect particle *air* (or the prospective *gu*), the internal structure of what follows the particle changes:

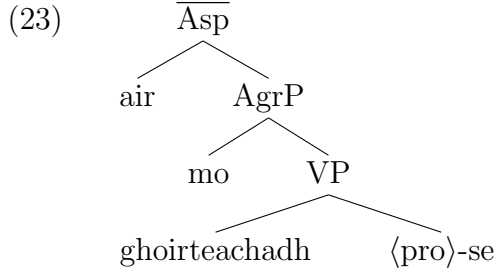
- (22) a. Tha an solas air na tranntsaichean a lìonadh  
 be.PRS the light PERF the corridors PRT pour.VN  
 ‘The light has filled the corridors’  
 b. Tha a’ bhròg air mo ghoirteachadh(-se).  
 be.PRS the shoe PERF 1.SG hurt.VN(-EMPH)  
 ‘The shoe has hurt ME.’  
 c. Tha a’ bhròg air mise a ghoirteachadh.  
 be.PRS the shoe PERF 1.SG-EMPH PRT hurt.VN  
 ‘The shoe has hurt ME.’

In (22a), the order of the verbal noun and the non-pronominal object has changed, and the object is no longer in genitive case (cf. the change in the definite article from *nan* to *na*). Further, a kind of ‘dummy’ particle, *a*, appears before the verbal noun. When the object is pronominal, we don’t find agreement fused with aspect, but rather two separate morphemes, *air* and, for first person singular objects, *mo*, as in (22b). Unlike with *ag*, it is possible to have a full emphatic pronominal form preceding the verbal noun, as in (22c), following the pattern in (22a) with the dummy particle. We see, then, quite distinct syntactic structures for these two different kinds of aspectual phrase.

We can understand this difference theoretically via an analysis which posits two positions for objects and also two positions for the verbal noun.

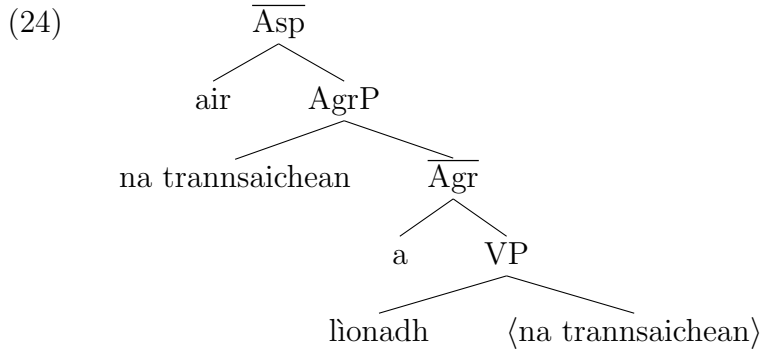
Let us look first at the case of the perfect AspP with a pronominal emphatic object. There are two possibilities: (i) either the emphatic particle is attached to a pronoun which then appears between *air* and the verbal

noun (22c), or (ii) there is an element *mo*, identical to a first person singular possessive pronoun, that appears between *air* and the verbal noun and the emphatic particle appears after the verbal noun, (22b). We can capture this second case as follows:



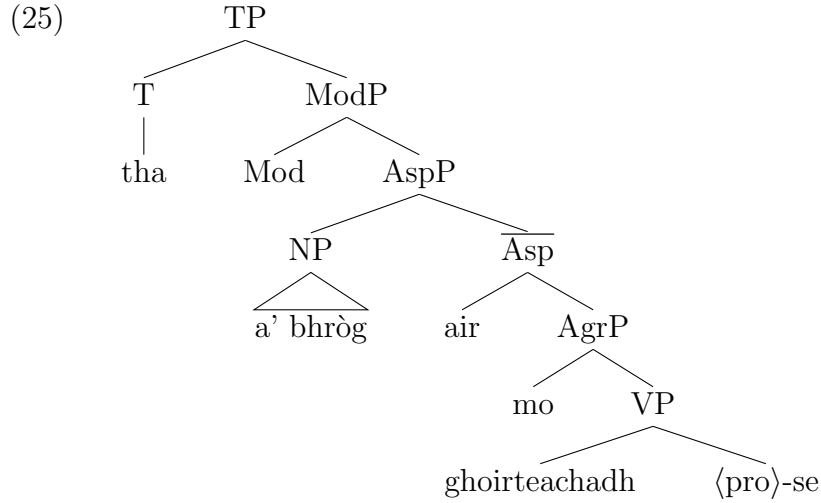
A null pronoun appears as the object of the verb, with the emphatic particle attached to, and agreeing with, it. The information about what kind of pronoun it is is specified by the higher particle *mo*. Adger (1996) argued that *mo* in such examples is the head of a phrase that expresses agreement features in the clause, and I have therefore labelled it AgrP in the structure above.

This then provides a way to think about examples like (22a): when the object is a full noun phrase, a syntactic rule displaces it from its position inside the verb phrase to attach as the specifier of this agreement element, which then surfaces as the otherwise mysterious dummy particle *a*. This analysis entails that the direct object is phrase structurally in two positions, though it is pronounced only in one (the unpronounced position is marked with angled braces in the diagram):

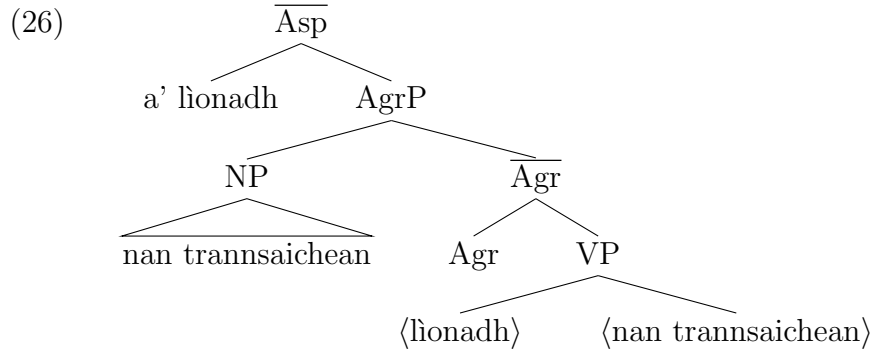


In all of these cases, a full AspP is projected when a subject is added, and then the whole structure is the complement of an auxiliary in T, so (22b)

has the following structure:



Turning back to simple aspect, this has exactly the same structure, but the verbal noun is also in two syntactic positions, and is pronounced, together with the agreement head, if it is present, at the Asp position, which is why the object follows the verbal noun in examples like (20a):



This analysis, to the extent that it is correct, provides us with the category AgrP for the constituent that follows Asp. This AgrP constituent is also found in other syntactic contexts (see section 3), and is roughly equivalent in function to infinitivals in other languages.

There is one further important structure involving AspP, used in the case of certain verbs of position, as well as in nominal predication. In this structure, the preposition *ann an* appears. I gloss it here as STAT, for stative:

- (27) a. agus a bhith **nad** **laighe** air an t-sràid a’  
 and PRT be.VN STAT.2.SG lie.VN on the street SIMP  
 feitheamh fix eile  
 wait.VN fix other  
 ‘while lying on the street waiting for another fix.’ CM2 89
- b. Nuair a bhios sinn uile **nar** **coigrich** agus  
 when REL be.FUT.REL we all STAT.1.PL strangers and  
 nach creid sinn rud sam bith.  
 REL.NEG believe we thing any  
 ‘When we’ll all be strangers and believe nothing’ NAA 13

The verbs that STAT appears with are what Dowty (1979) calls ‘interval statives’: they involve a state that is conceived of as holding for a temporary interval of time (see Schreiner 2015 for an alternative characterization), and include verbs meaning ‘lie’, ‘sit’, ‘stand’, ‘sleep’ etc. Nominal predication expressed in this way, as in (27b), is also interpreted as holding for a temporary period of time. Adger (2020) suggests that this is why sentences like (28a) are odd in Gaelic, with consultants accepting them to the extent that cathood can be a temporary property (if Lilly, for example, is a shape-changer), while sentences like (28b) are acceptable, since studenthood is a temporary property:

- (28) a. ??Tha Lilly na cat  
 be.PRS Lilly STAT.3.S.F cat  
 for ‘Lilly is a cat.’
- b. Tha Iain na oileanach  
 be.PRS Iain STAT.3.S.M student  
 ‘Iain is a student.’

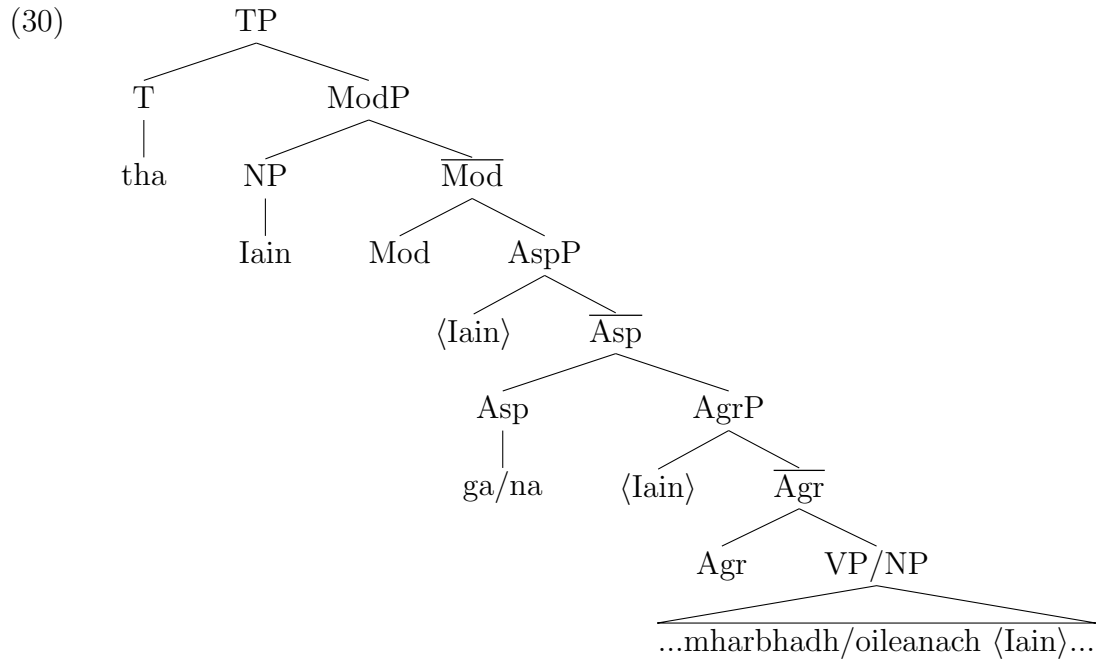
The idea that *ann* is best thought of as aspect as opposed to a preposition in these structures is bolstered by that fact that agreement on the aspectual particle here is obligatory, which is not the case for the simple locative preposition. Adger (2020) proposes that the subject in these cases is low in the structure, below Aspect, and that a syntactic rule moves it to a higher position, triggering agreement. This assimilates these structures to the passive type structures also found with aspectuals, as in (29), where an object is moved by syntactic rule to subject position across an aspect particle and that particle obligatorily bears (or is adjacent to) agreement features (a configuration reminiscent of participle agreement in Romance languages, Kayne



1989):

- (29) a. bha mi air mo rothaigeadh cho mòr 's gun  
 be.PST I PRF 1SG fire-up co big and that  
 robh miann agam dràibheadh  
 be.PST.DEP wish at.1SG drive.VN  
 'I was fired up so much that I wanted to drive.' TSIR 9
- b. Tha Iain ga mharbhadh  
 be.PRS Iain SIMP.3SG.M kill.VN  
 'Iain is being killed.' MacAulay (1992, p.177)

Examples (28b) and (29b) can be brought into one general syntactic frame that looks roughly as follows, where Asp expresses the relevant grammatical features of both Asp and Agr and T expresses the features of T and Mod:



### 3 Predicate Subject Structures

In addition to the [Subject Predicate] small clause structures, Gaelic also has a number of predication structures which involve an apparent inversion of

this order in the context of a copular particle<sup>9</sup>:

(31) [Copula Predicate Subject]

- (32) a. B' aocoltach na togalaichean ann a sheo ris  
 COP.PST unlike the.PL buildings in PRT here to.DEF  
 na bruchlagan bochda ...  
 the. hovels poor.PL ...  
 'The buildings here were unlike the poor hovels ...' TSIR 1
- b. Ged as dreachmhor an damh, agus bu  
 although REL.COP handsome the stag, and COP.PST  
 shuarach esan  
 careless he.EMPH  
 'Although the more handsome the stag, the more careless he  
 was.' CM2 136

These examples are fairly literary and this kind of structure is rare outside of certain well-defined syntactic circumstances detailed in the next few sections (similar constructions in Irish seem to be more productive, Doherty 1996).

One approach to these is that they are fundamentally similar to small clauses, but involve a syntactic rule that inverts the predicate around the subject when there is a copula. Adger and Ramchand (2003) take this approach, while den Dikken (2006) suggests that there are two distinct constructions, one which has the predicate structurally higher than the subject, and the other which has it lower. Ramchand (1996) also suggested a distinct syntax for copular structures involving a rightward subject, an idea further developed by Sheil (2016).

In the examples above, the subject is a nominal phrase, but, as we will see, it can also be clausal, including the constituent identified above as AgrP in section 2.3.2; the predicate that combines with the copula is always a lexical category: A or N<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>The copula, when it is positive, is either present tense *is* or non-present *bu*. The present tense form is, however, deleted after initial particles signifying questionhood *an*, negation *cha* or both *nach*; it coalesces with the relative particle to give *as* and with the embedding complementizer to give *gur*.

<sup>10</sup>There is also one case of a preposition (*le*, 'with') combining with the copula to express ownership, but I leave this aside here.

### 3.1 Adjectival Predicates in experiential function

There are a number of adjectival predicates which are used to express psychological states as follows<sup>11</sup>:

- (33) a. Is coma le Aonghas siud.  
 COP.PRS indifferent with Angus that  
 ‘Angus doesn’t care about that.’  
 b. Bu mhath leam taing a thoirt do dh’Iain.  
 COP.PST good with.1SG thanks PRT give.VN to Iain  
 ‘I’d like to give thanks to Iain.’

Structurally, these involve the copula, an adjective denoting some kind of psychological state, a prepositional phrase headed by the preposition *le*, ‘with’, containing a noun phrase that refers to an individual who experiences that state, and another phrase which is in some sense the object of that state. That object can either be a noun phrase (as in (33a)) or what we identified in section 2.3.2 as an AgrP: a verbal noun which may have a preceding object if it is transitive (33b). Adger (to appear), extending earlier arguments about the structure of psychological predicates in Adger and Ramchand (2006), argues that the prepositional phrase headed by *le* is in constituency with what follows it, as opposed to being in constituency with the adjective; one of the arguments is that it obligatorily undergoes ellipsis in examples like the following:

- (34) a. An coma leat sin?  
 COP.Q indifferent with.2SG that  
 ‘Do you care about that?’  
 b. Cha choma \*(leam)  
 COP.NEG indifferent \*(with.1SG)  
 ‘No.’

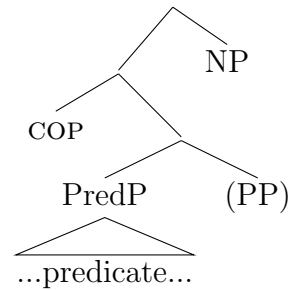
The ellipsis data entails that the structure proposed by Ramchand (1996) and Sheil (2016) for copular constructions, where the nominal phrase is projected to the right, cannot be correct, as it would place the PP in constituency with the adjective, not the subject, leading to the incorrect expectation that it

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<sup>11</sup>Other adjectival predicates with this syntax and semantics include *beag*, ‘little’; *toil*, ‘pleasant’; *caomh*, ‘pleasant’. There is at least one noun *miann*, ‘desire’, that appears in this context, but most of the relevant predicates are adjectival.

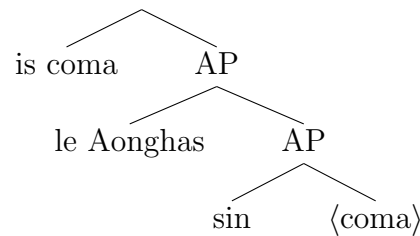
should escape ellipsis:

(35)



An alternative that is consistent with both coordination and ellipsis data is that the predicate in this construction is the adjective *coma*, meaning here (roughly) ‘of no concern’, and that the nominal phrase (in this example, *sin*, ‘that’) is the subject of this predicate. The prepositional phrase specifying who is experiencing the relevant feeling is then a modifier of this predication. A syntactic rule inverts the adjective, so that it coalesces with the copula.

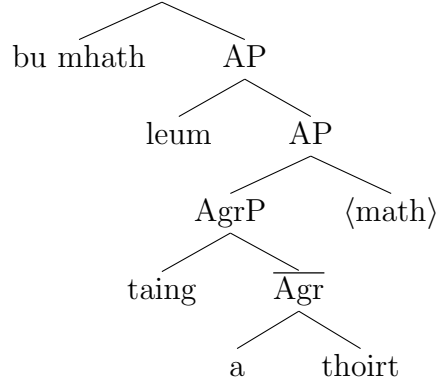
(36)



In (34b) the complement of the copula is elided, so the PP is not retained under ellipsis, while the inverted predicate, which coalesces with the copula, is.

In cases where an AgrP appears after the PP, as in (33b), this too is simply a subject of the adjective:

(37)



### 3.2 Nominal Predicates in modal function

In addition to adjectives, certain nouns also appear after the copula, distinguishing this kind of clause from the small clauses we saw in section 2. These typically, though not always, give rise to a modal meaning, and appear with a prepositional phrase headed by the preposition *do*, ‘to/for’ as opposed to *le*<sup>12</sup>:

- (38) a. Is fheudar dhomh an t-each a reic.  
 COP.PRS need to.1sg the horse PRT sell.VN  
 ‘I must sell the horse.’  
 b. B’ èiginn dhan an rìgh an dùthaich fhàgail.  
 COP.PST necessity to.DEF the king the country leave.VN  
 ‘The king had to leave the country.’

These constructions, unlike the adjectival ones, resist a nominal phrase, but do allow an AgrP after the PP, so we have the following kinds of contrast:

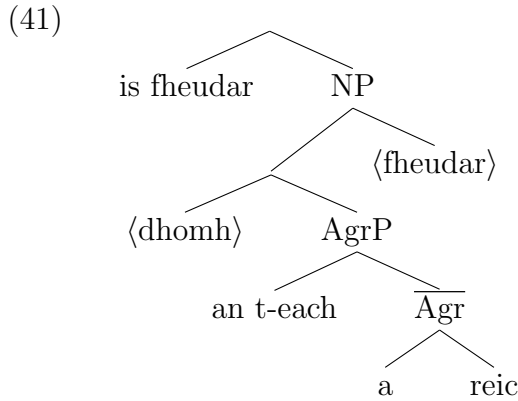
- (39) a. \*Is fheudar dhomh each.  
 COP.PRS need to.1sg horse  
 ‘I need a horse.’  
 b. Is fheudar dhomh each a bhith agam.  
 COP.PRS need to.1sg horse PRT be.VN at.1sg  
 ‘I need (to have) a horse.’

<sup>12</sup>Other nominal predicates with this syntax and semantics include *àbhaist*, ‘custom’; *còir*, ‘duty’; *urrainn*, ‘ability’; *mithich*, ‘(right) time’.

Further, modal nominals can have a finite clausal argument, as well as the non-finite clausal arguments we have seen so far:

- (40) a. Is fheudar gun do rinn foghlam, foghlam, foghlam  
 COP need that PST do.PST education education education  
 feum air choreigin dham eanchainn  
 use on some to-my brain  
 ‘Education, education, education, must have done some use to  
 my brain.’ DASG 333

These facts suggest that the semantics of these modals is monadic: they are one place predicates that modalise a proposition. Adger (to appear) proposes that these too are inversion constructions, but that the prepositional phrase is a subject of the obligatory AgrP<sup>13</sup>:



### 3.3 Comparatives

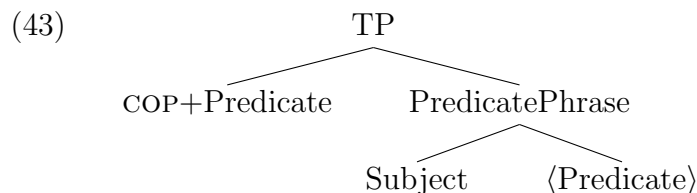
One further construction that involves an inverted predicate is comparatives. These involve a particular morphological form of the adjective (usually addition of a schwa with palatalization of any final consonant, but sometimes suppletion). This ‘comparative’ form cannot appear as predicate in the small clause structure, which Adger (2005) puts down to it being a nominal form. Like the nominals discussed in 3.2, comparative adjectives appear immediately after the copula and, in some cases, are immediately followed by a

<sup>13</sup>Adger actually argues that the subject *dhomh* in examples like this syntactically displaces into the matrix clause and adopts the idea that the predicative categories are actually inside a PredP, but I leave these details aside here.

subject (as in (42a)). However, in the modern language, it is extremely common for the subject to be relativized (42b), so the comparative has the distribution of an adjectival phrase:

- (42) a. Cha bu luaithe a bha na faclan na cheann  
 NEG COP.PST fast.CMP that be.PST the words in.his head  
 na chuir e sgraing air aodann  
 than put.PST he scowl on his.face  
 ‘No sooner were the words in his head than he put a scowl on  
 this face.’ TSIR 139
- b. Air cùlaibh sin, bha grunn sheadaichean na bu  
 on back that, be.PST several sheds CMP COP.PST  
 lugha.  
 small.CMP  
 Behind that, there were several smaller sheds. CM2 101

For all of these inverted cases (experiential adjectives, modal nouns, comparatives, and other constructions not discussed here), the structure appears to be one where the predicate is inverted to a position to the left of the subject:



I have labelled the whole sentence as a TP (Tense Phrase). This is because there is a rudimentary tense system encoded by the copula: present vs everything else (past, future, conditional). Adger and Ramchand (2003) suggest that the copula does not specify an event or situation, while the auxiliary does, so that the range of meaningful tense distinctions is reduced in the copular clause. That in turn allows us to see that the copular and non-copular clauses are both essentially small clause complements of clausal heads, the former but not the latter involving inversion.

## 4 Equatives and Clefts

The copula can also occur with a following pronominal, giving rise to constructions of the form:

(44) [Copula Pronoun Subject Predicate]

In this case definite noun phrases and relative clauses can be the predicate. These structures are used typically to express equatives (45a) or to mark discourse or contrastive emphasis on a constituent (45b):

- (45) a. Oir b' e iadsan gràdh mo chridhe  
 for COP.PST it they-EMP love my heart  
 'For they were the love of my heart.' NAA 50
- b. 'S e na gòrs a chuir crìoch orm.  
 COP.PRS it the gears that put end on.1SG  
 'It was the gears that put an end to me.' CM2 24

Equatives in Gaelic seem to be asymmetric. In (46), for example, we find the name of the restaurant (*The Eyrie*) immediately after the pronoun. The nominal phrase that follows *The Eyrie* is semantically a description of it, giving a kind of subject predicate construction. Although in equatives both subject and predicate are syntactically categories that are typically non-predicative (a nominal phrase in (46a), an AgrP in (46b) and a finite clause in (46c)), nevertheless the second is usually interpreted as attributing some property to the first.

- (46) a. B' e The Eyrie an taigh-bìdh a bu daoire  
 COP.PST it The Eyrie the restaurant that COP expensive.CMP  
 ann an Dùn Èideann  
 in Edinburgh  
 'The Eyrie was the dearest restaurant in Edinburgh.' TSIR 10
- b. 's e an rud bu duilghe na pàirtean fhaighinn  
 COP it the thing COP difficult.CMP the parts get.VN  
 'the most difficult thing was getting the parts.' CM1 68
- c. An rud a b' fheàrr a dh'ionnsaich mi o  
 the thing REL COP.PST good.CMP REL learn.PST I from  
 na pàipearan seo 's e gun robh a' bhreug  
 the papers this COP it that be.PST.DEP the lie



uaireannan a' coileanadh na firinn  
 sometimes SIMP shaping the truth  
 'The best thing I learned from these papers was that sometimes  
 lies shape the truth' CM1 107

Examples like (45b), to a certain extent at least, look syntactically like clefts in other languages, and I will use that term to refer to them. However, their use does not exactly match the use of clefts in, say, English (Lamb 2008, Sheil 2016).

The order of elements in clefts may be further perturbed, for example by extracting the subject of the cleft as in (46c) above or (47):

- (47) Ach a' chiad rud tha sinn dol a dhèanamh 's e  
 but the first thing be.PRS we go.VN PRT do.VN COP it  
 dhol a dh'fhaicinn an àite dhuinn fhèin.'  
 go.VN PRT see.VN the place for.1.PL self  
 'But the first thing we are going to do is to go and see the place for  
 ourselves. CM166

Gaelic uses two distinct strategies in cleft constructions depending on the category of the clefted constituent: if what is clefted is a noun phrase or a clause the pronoun *e* is used (48), while if what is clefted is an AP, PP or AspP, we find instead the locative preposition *ann*, (49)<sup>14</sup>.

- (48) a. 's e [an cat] a thug Calum do Mhàiri  
 Cop.PRS it the cat REL give.PST.REL Calum to Mary  
 'It's the cat that Calum gave to Mary.'  
 b. 's e [gu robh e tinn] a thuirt mi  
 Cop.PRS it that be.PST.DEP he ill REL say.PST.REL I  
 'What I said was that he was ill.'  
 c. 's e [an leabhar ud a leughadh] a dh'iarr  
 Cop.PRS it the book that PRT read.VN REL ask.PST.REL  
 e orm  
 he on.1s  
 'What he asked me to do was to read that book.'

<sup>14</sup>Sheil (2016, p83) gives an example where *glè bheag do sgoil* 'very little schooling' is clefted in this construction, and she takes this to be an adjective phrase headed by *beag*, 'little'. I think it is more likely that *beag* here is a nominal expressing an amount.

- (49) a. 'S ann [breagha] a tha i.  
 Cop.PRS in.3MS beautiful REL be.PRS she  
 'She's beautiful'
- b. 'S ann [a' ruith] a bha Seònaig.  
 Cop.PRS in.3MS SIMP run.VN that be.PST Seònaig  
 'What Seònaig was doing was running.'
- c. 'S ann [air a' bhòrd] a bha Seònaig.  
 Cop.PRS in.3MS on the.DAT table.DAT that be.PST Seònaig  
 'It was on the table that Seonag was.'

Just as we saw in small clauses, AP, AspP and PP pattern together. Sheil (2016) argues that the difference between *e* and *ann* here is to be understood via a syntactic rule of agreement, while Adger (2011) suggests it should be tied down to the semantics of the phrase that is clefted.

We also find *ann* in a number of cases where there is apparently no clefted constituent. Sheil 2016, in an in depth discussion of this construction, calls it a 'propositional cleft':

- (50) 'S ann a shaoileadh tu gur e neach-cùraim a  
 COP in.3MS REL think.CND you that.COP it carer REL  
 th' annam seach poileas!  
 be.PRS in.1SG instead of policeman  
 'You'd think I was a carer not a policeman!' CM1 80

Shiel argues that the meaning of such examples involves focus on the entire sentence.

We saw in 2.3.2 that AspP could be used to express nominal predication when the predication was conceived of as non-permanent. The cleft structure is used to express nominal predication more generally (see also (50) directly above):

- (51) a. Ach 's e uirsgeulan a bh' ann ta sin cuideachd  
 but COP.PRS it stories REL be.PST in.3PL that also  
 nan dòigh fhèin  
 in.their way self  
 'But they were stories too in their own way.' TSIR 150
- b. Gur e sgàthan dorch a th' anns an  
 That.COP it mirror dark REL be.PRS in.DEF the

eanchainn.

brain

‘That the brain is a dark mirror.’

CM2 55

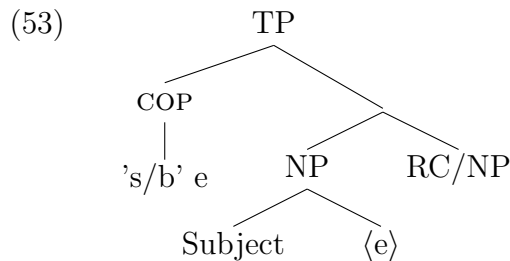
In both of these examples the nominal phrase that is semantically the predicate appears as the syntactic subject of the cleft (e.g. ‘a dark mirror’), while the semantic subject (e.g. ‘the brain’) is embedded in a relative clause predicate. There is no temporal restriction on these structures, and they can be used, for example, as definitional statements:

- (52) Oir ’s e meatailt bog a th’ ann an òr.  
 for COP it metal soft REL be.PRS in gold  
 ‘Since gold is a soft metal.’

CM1 19

Sheil (2016) argues that clefts and equatives involve the copula taking as its complement a single constituent headed by a determiner like element D as a complement that surfaces as *e* or *ann*. This leads to a non-unified analysis of clefts and equatives on the one hand, and copular constructions on the other. In a cleft or equative, the copula takes a single constituent as its complement, while in true copular constructions (such as those discussed in section 3) the copula is dyadic, connecting a predicate and subject.

An alternative view, proposed by Adger and Ramchand (2003), is that the pronominal in the cleft is the true predicate (it is simply a nominal of category N), inverting just as nominal predicates usually do in the context of the copula. This makes the phrase that follows the pronoun the subject of predication, and the phrase that follows that is argued to be an optional adjunct (either a relative clause (RC) or a nominal phrase (NP)) that specifies the content of the predicate via an anaphoric relation with the pronoun, as follows:



If this is correct, then equatives and clefts can be folded into the analysis of copular structures which, as we saw already, are fundamentally small clauses,

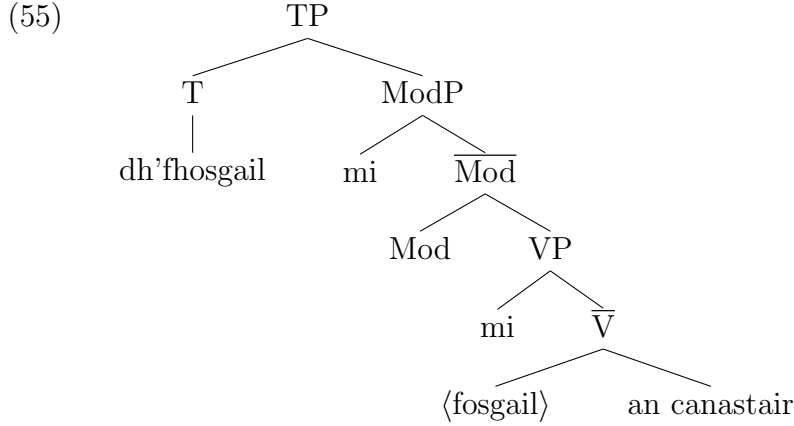
so that all of the clause structures we have encountered so far are variants of a single unitary structure.

## 5 V initial structures

The final main clause type in Gaelic I will discuss involves the finite verb. So far we have examined only non-finite verb forms inside AspPs. However, when the verb root itself is inflected for tense, it appears in a position where it precedes the subject, giving rise to VSO orders:

- (54) a. Dh'fhosgail mi an canastair  
           PST.open I the canister  
           'I opened the canister' CM2 130
- b. Chuir Grace crìoch air an t-siogarait  
           PST.put Grace end on the cigarette  
           'Grace finished the cigarette.' TSIR 128

We have already seen clause structures where the auxiliary marks tense, and have suggested that the auxiliary appears in a clausal T head which has features of both T and Mod. We can capture the verb initial ordering via the idea that, in general in the language, an element (potentially) morphologically marked for tense is always pronounced at the T position. I leave the mechanism which implements this 'displaced pronunciation' unspecified here (Travis 1984, Brody 2000, Matushansky 2006, Roberts 2005, Harizanov and Gribanova 2019, Arregi and Pietraszko 2021), but whatever it may be, it gives the following structure for (54a), again with the two subject positions we have already seen:



It seems not implausible, then, that the wide range of clause structures in Gaelic can be understood as variations on a single syntactic theme.

## 6 Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to suggest that the clause structures of Gaelic, which appear to be quite diverse in their structure, are actually fundamentally similar. They all involve a lexical category which projects a subject predicate structure, which can be embedded in larger structures. Sometimes those larger structures, depending on their content, trigger an inversion of the predicate, so that it comes to be more prominent than its subject (in copular clauses and VSO clauses) and sometimes that same inversion rule applies to an item that is formally a nominal predicate, but that semantically acts like a placeholder for the meaning of the predicate which is supplied by a definite nominal phrase or a clause (as in equatives and clefts).

Of course the aim I set myself in this paper has meant that most of Gaelic syntax is left untouched. There is a great deal of formal analysis consistent with what I have said here in the domain of questions and relative clauses (Adger and Ramchand 2005), ellipsis (Thoms 2016, Adger 2017a), nominal structure (Adger 2013) etc., but equally large tracts of the formal analysis of Gaelic syntax remain unexplored.

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