

Agreement in Old Irish

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Old Irish, spoken in Ireland from approximately 700-950 CE, has what are traditionally called infixed and suffixed pronouns (Thurneysen 1946: 255ff.). These pronouns can be attached to prepositions (1) or verbs (2):

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|-----|----|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) | a. | fiad | día | “in the presence of God” |
| | | in_presence_of | God.DAT.SG | |
| | b. | fiado | | “in his presence” |
| | | in_presence_of.3SGM/N | | |
| (2) | a. | do·biur | inna=libru | “I give the books” |
| | | PRV.gives.1SG.PRES | DET.ACC.PL=book.ACC.PL | |
| | b. | do-s·biur | | “I give them” |
| | | PRV-3PL.OBJ.gives.1SG.PRES | | |

As can be deduced from the terminology “infix pronoun” and “suffixed pronoun”, these elements are generally treated as true pronouns, that is, as clitic arguments. This contention is certainly true historically. The infixed and suffixed pronouns do arise from pronouns which later became clitic to prepositions (3) and verbs (4):

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|-----|----|------------------------|---|--------------------------------|-----|--------------------|
| (3) | a. | impu | < | *ambi | sūs | “around them” |
| | | around.3PL | | around | 3PL | |
| | b. | dínn | < | *dī | snī | “from us” |
| | | from.1PL | | from | 1PL | |
| (4) | a. | dob·éccai | < | *dī-swī·en-k ^w iset | | “he sees you (pl)” |
| | | PRV.2PL.sees.3SG.PRES | | PRV-2PL-PRV-sees.3SG.PRES | | |
| | b. | rom·car | < | *ro-mē·caras | | “he has loved me” |
| | | PRV.1SG.loves.3SG.PRET | | PRV.2PL.loves.3SG.PRET | | |

The synchronic status of these markers is, however, less certain. It has recently been argued that what are traditionally referred to as pronouns are rather instances of agreement. Eska (2009/10) discusses verbal marking, while Griffith (2011) looks also at prepositional marking and the marking of noun phrases. The main points of their argumentation focus on the fact that the “pronouns” can double full noun phrases and that, according to standard tests (e.g. Zwicky and Pullum 1983, Roberts 1993: 112-17), they generally behave more like agreement markers than clitic arguments. If one assumes that Eska and Griffith are correct, then Old Irish can be

added to the list of languages showing the development of agreement from earlier pronominal arguments.

This conclusion seems for the most part to be correct, but it is perhaps less nuanced than it could be. There are a number of points where the agreement is not canonical (in the sense of Corbett 2006), and the present paper looks to examine these with an eye toward indicating the diachronic development of the specific features. In some cases it is possible to discern that the change is in the direction of more canonical development. In others the directionality is less clear. In any case, however, phonological change – especially the reduction of final unstressed vowels and many pretonic vowels to schwa – as the language evolves into Middle Irish drastically changes the agreement patterns of the language. For example, the new-found object agreement on verbs, mentioned above, is given up.

The goals of this paper are therefore: to give a brief overview of the agreement patterns in Old Irish, to trace some of the historically more recent cases of agreement, to examine the canonicity of these cases, and to trace the demise in Middle Irish of several types of agreement found in Old Irish.

References

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