Salient features of Irish syntax

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Knowledge among linguists of Irish syntax is usually confined to isolated facts such as the non-existence of single words for ‘yes’ and ‘no’ or the unusual word order VSO for non-topicalised declarative sentences. The first of these facts is merely an accident of syntactic development while the second, although equally an outcome of syntactic development, over which there has been a considerable amount of controversy formerly, represents a more stable and in a sense absolute aspect of the syntax of Irish. Thus one has the development of a form which is almost the equivalent of ‘yes’ in English, $\textit{sea}^2$, which strictly speaking can be used in reply to questions which contain a form of the copula as it is composed of the elements $\textit{is}$ ‘is’ and $\textit{ea}$ ‘it’, i.e. ‘it is (so)’ but which is increasingly used in replies to questions which do not contain a form of the copula and so is becoming detached from the contingencies of verbal syntax and independently assuming the function of ‘yes’ in English. The canonical word order VSO for declarative sentences is adhered to thoroughly in Irish and shows little or no signs of disintegrating or being replaced by the order SVO of English which is superstratum to Irish in all the remaining dialect areas. Even topicalization does not allow as a rule the disregard of this word order. The processes of topicalization in Irish do allow the fronting of certain sentence elements when these are to be rhematized. Consider the following.

(1) $\textit{Chuaghl s€ thar s€ile blian ó shin.}$
(1) a. $\textit{Is thar s€ile a chuaghl s€ blian ó shin.}$
(1) b. $\textit{Is blian ó shin a chuaghl s€ thar s€ile.}$
(went he over sea year from this)
‘He went abroad a year ago’.
‘It’s abroad that he went a year ago’.
‘It’s a year ago since he went abroad’.

Both the temporal and the locative adverbs in this sentence can be topicalized by fronting.

The above topicalizations show that VSO has been maintained despite fronting by the relativization of the main verb and the raising of the topicalized elements to subject compliment position in the main clause with the copula. Note that as opposed to English for example Irish does not have a dummy subject for copula sentences (an equivalent to ‘it’ in (1) a and b) so that the verb ($\textit{is}$) opens the sentence.

In one instance the copula is not used to topicalization that is when the verb of existence $\textit{ta}$ is the verb of the sentence whose element is to be topicalized. Consider,
(2) a  Tá lucht cónaithe na tíre in a raibh tú inti dúchneasach.
   (is people living of country-GEN in-which was your in-her dark-skinn)
   ‘The people of the country in which you were are dark-skinned’.

   b  An tír ina raibh tú inti, tá a lucht cónaithe dúchneasach.
   (the country in-which you were you in-her is her people living dark-skinned)
   ‘The country in which you were in has dark-skinned people.

The comma in (2)b correspond to a fall in tone for the reminder of the sentence which would point to a treatment of the two sections as independent and so not really a case of another word order than VSO. The word order in Irish is peculiar not only with regard to the position of the verb relative to the subject but also because of that of the subject. Here Irish shows variation in word order depending on whether the object is nominal or pronominal.

(3) a  Chonaic Séamus an cailín ar bharr an chnoic.
   (saw James the girl on top of hill-GEN)
   ‘James saw the girl on top of the hill’.

   b  Chonaic Séamus ar bharr an chnoic í.
   (saw James on top of hill-GEN her)
   ‘James saw her on top of the hill’.

In (3)a the nominal object occupies the normal position immediately after the subject. It occurs at the end of the sentence however if it assumes pronominal form, an interesting case of word order being determined by lexical class.

   The notion of lexical class and the consideration as to what elements belong to which class is important for the analysis of a language’s syntax and in Irish when one turns one’s attention to this question one notices that there is a certain gravitation towards a certain word class which is to be the topic of the remainder of this sketch.

   Irish has roughly the same division of word classes as does English, and as with the latter the two chief word classes are the noun and the verb. As a generalisation one could maintain that Irish is noun centered\(^5\). By this I mean that quite apart from designating actual objects or abstract entities Irish uses nouns with great frequency when referring to actions as well. Here what one has in a nominalization of a verb and a support verb which when linked up to the noun in question expresses a certain action. Such deverbative nominalizations are known from English for example in such sentences as

(4) a  He washed up after dinner.
   b  He did the washing up after dinner.

   Seen semantically such nominalizations indicate that the action is considered as a completed whole as opposed to the more neutral verbal form. This distinction between engaging in an activity and performing a single unified action is reflected in the morphology of English which can accommodate such a differentiation. Irish morphology has also the same possibility and in partial contradiction to English makes greater use of it. Consider

(5)   Rinne sé dearmad faoi.
Here glossing the Irish sentence presents difficulties as there is no corresponding noun to the verb ‘forget’ in English.

The verb used in (5) is a simple support verb much as is found in English in deverbative nominalizations. But the verb ‘do’ is by no means the only or indeed the most common verb found in such constructions. Independent lexicalised verbs are also used so that the Irish sentence can no longer considered a deverbative nominalization as the English one in (4)b but rather a normal manner of expressing an action. This is seen clearly in such sentences as

(6)

a. Lig sé an teach a dhíol.
   (released he the house ‘to’ sell-VN)
   ‘He let the house be sold’.

b. Lig sí osna.
   (released the sigh)
   ‘She sighed’.

c. Lig said fios bhur ruin leo.
   (released they knowledge your secret-GEN with-them)
   ‘They revealed your secret to them’.

(6)c shows the method for incorporating the object of the action in to the syntax of the sentence: what is in English a direct object appears as a genitive in Irish controlled by the noun which together with the main verb represents the meaning of the verb in the English equivalent. The significance of the genitive for linking up direct objects to noun centred verb phrases is correlated by its importance in other spheres in Irish. In the formation of what I call the state marker (that non-finite verbal form which corresponds to the past participle of English) the genitive is used. The action marker (again the rough equivalent in English is the infinitive and the present participle) is a nominal form which is morphologically linked to the verb by derivation (there are a series of suffixes which when added to the verbal stem form the action marker). It can, just as can other nouns, be inflected for the genitive.

(7)

a. Áit gan chónaí. Áit chónaithe.
   (place without live-VN) (place live-VN+GEN)
   ‘Uninhabited place’, ‘Place of residence’.

b. Tá sé ag déanamh an obair. Tá an obair déanta aige.
   (is he at do-VN the work) (is the work do-VA at-him)
   ‘He is doing the work. He has done the work’.

A further function of the genitive which testifies to its established position in Irish morphology is its use after nouns where in English one would have adjectives.

(8) Mo theanga dhúchais.
   (my tongue inherit-NOUN+GEN)
   ‘My native language’.
Furthermore it is used to where English has a single lexical element or a compound noun
the modifying part of which corresponds to the genitive of Irish.

(9) \[ \text{Mac léinn. Cáilín aimsire. Seomra codlata. Fear oibre.} \]
    (son knowledge–GEN) (girl service-GEN) (room sleep-GEN) (man work-GEN)

It should be pointed out that although the genitive is widely used in verbal constructions
of the type in (6)c it is not essential that it be employed to indicate the direct object. This
can be done –equally well by a prepositional complement.

(9) a  \[ \text{Chuir sé fad ar an léacht.} \]
       (put he length on the lecture)
       ‘He lengthened the lecture’.

       b  \[ \text{Bhain sé leas as a chuáirt sa Spáinn.} \]
           (drew he benefit out-of his visit in the Spain)
           ‘He benefited by his stay in Spain’.

As might be expected Irish makes use of the various avenues opened up by this
nominalization. Thus with the word for length \text{fadh} one has it applied in a number of
situations where English would have an adjective or an adverbial. Consider

(10) a  \[ \text{Tá a thrí fad ann.} \]
        (is its threefold length in-it)
        ‘It’s three times as long’.

       b  \[ \text{Chuir sé a fhad eile leis.} \]
           (put he its length other-ADJ with-it)
           ‘He made it as long again’.

       c  \[ \text{Tá fadh na teanga air.} \]
           (is length tongue-GEN on-him)
           ‘He is very talkative’.

       d  \[ \text{Fad is a bhí mè ann.} \]
           (length and COMP was-REL I in-it)
           ‘As long as I was there.’

Again these sentences should convey something of the favour of Irish syntax in their
characteristic deviation from the word classes employed in English. Note no elements are
deleted but from the English point of view shifted. Or one may have picturesque
circumlocution as in (10)c. Perhaps the most curious of these shifts is that which one has
when an adverbial is nominalized as in

(11) a  \[ \text{Níl fios a mhalaírte aici.} \]
        (is-not knowledge its opposite-GEN at her)
        ‘She does not know any better’.

       b  \[ \text{Tá deis a labhartha aige.} \]
It will have been noted that in the above sample sentences there occur forms which unite prepositions and pronouns in a single word. These are the prepositional pronouns of Irish which play a central role in the language syntax. There are sixteen of them in all and they can combine with any one of the seven personal pronouns. These synthetic forms are the obvious result of elision of independent prepositions and independent pronouns which arose because of the frequency with which these word class elements came together. An equivalent process whereby prepositions combine with possessive pronouns never quite caught on in Irish and is restricted to forms which while orthographically occasionally represented as one word do not show any phonetic difference when compared to the independent forms, e.g. lemo (le’ with’, mo’ my’).

Ontogenetically it is clear then that the incorporating prepositional pronouns are the result of an allegro phenomenon being transferred into the lento speech. In this process some of the regularities which must have been present in the original stage of the development of these forms have been maintained, for example, the first person plural always ends in a palatal nasal, the second person singular in a voiceless dental plosive etc. From the standpoint of the present-day language it is best however to regard the prepositional pronouns as lexicalised form as their derivation is frequently opaque and as there is no productive derivation of new forms from additional prepositions and a given personal pronoun.

The existence of these compound forms ties up with the phenomenon of noun dominance which has been dealt with above. The prepositional pronouns all occur with verbal constructions in which a noun dominates. Such constructions have literal meanings in which they represent a statement about location, this then assuming a more figurative meaning. The equivalents to English sentences show a noun which is the equivalent of the lexicalised verb and which is then described locatively with respect to a personal object. The location is expressed by means of a preposition such as ‘at’, ‘below’, ‘with’, ‘on’, ‘above’, etc.

(12) a Cuireadh sé costas mór orm.  
(put-COND it cost big on-me)  
‘It would cost me a lot’.

b Dúirt sé nach raibh cuimhne aige aithint.  
(said he that-not was REL memory at-him on-her)  
‘He said he did not remember her’.

The second example above shows how more that one prepositional pronoun can be found in a single verbal construction.

The figurative use of location has many ramifications. First and foremost it is used in Irish to denote possession. Here the preposition found is ‘at’

(13) a Níl aon suim agam sa teangeolaíocht.  
(is-not any interest at-me in-the linguistics)  
‘I am not interested in linguistics’.

b Níl aon gluaisteán ag mo athair.  
(is-not any car at my father)  
‘My father has no car’.

(is facility his speak-VN+GEN at-him)  
‘He speaks eloquently’.
The extent to which this construction suggests possession can be seen by its substituting the regular possessive pronoun in many instances.

(14) a  _An iníon is sine aici_ = _A hiníon is sine._
       (the daughter SUPERLATIVE old at-her) (her daughter SUPERLATIVE old)
       ‘Her oldest daughter’
ditto.

   b  _An baile seo againne_ = _Ár mbaile_.
       (the town here at-us) (our town)
       ‘Our town’
ditto

The use of the locative can be illuminating for the recognition of the relatedness of certain phenomena as well. A case of this can be seen in the Irish use of the locative construction as in (14) for expressing states. Statue verbs and possession in Irish can be represented by the same construction. Compare

(15)  _Tá dhá orlach agam air._
       (is two inch at-me on-him)
       ‘I am two inches taller than him’.

With (13) and (14). Just as the notion of location can be expanded to include that of possession so can the latter be extended itself to have a much broader range than would be conceived of when conceived of when considering a language such as English. The extent to which Irish has developed this can be seen from the following sentences.

(16) a  _Níl dul níos faide aige._
       (is-not go-VN COMPARATIVE further at-him)
       ‘It is as far as he can go’.

   b  _Níl dul uaidh agat._
       (is-not go-VN from-it at-you)
       ‘You can’t escape it’.

   c  _Níl baint aige sin leis._
       (is-not extract-VN at-it that with-it)
       ‘That has nothing to do with it’.

   d  _Níl teacht agam air._
       (is-not com-VN at-me on-it)
       ‘I can’t reach it’.

   e  _Níl an teanga ó dhúchas aige._
       (is-not the language from inherit-NOUN at-him)
       ‘He is not a native speaker’.

The examples under (16)c to e show typical combinations of nominalizations and the locative use of prepositions. The locative means for expressing a certain semantic proposition remains transparent as long as there is an object for the preposition involved. Where this is not the case the construction has become a opaque and lexicalised as a unit consisting of preposition and verb. Consider
(17) a Cuir Béarla air an méid sin.
(put English on the amount that)
‘Translate that in to English’.

b Tá an stoirm ag cur air.
(is the storm at put-VN on-it)
‘The storm is increasing’.

If location is given an appropriately wide interpretation to also include direction then one can subsume under the considerations here a further phenomenon. Again it involves a preposition, this time the one for ‘to’ do. Its normal use as a prepositional object can be seen in

(18) Bheannaigh sé go fánach dó.
(greeted he casually to-him)
‘He greeted him casually’.

In many cases the preposition ‘to’ is employed much as the so-called Pertinenzdativ in German\(^9\) to express to whom a certain statement or state of affairs is relevant. This use is also found in Hiberno-English, something which distinguishes it sharply from other English dialects\(^10\). Consider the following three sentences.

(19) a Más fíor dó é ní rachaidh mé ann.
(if-is true to-him it not go-FUTURE I in-it)
‘If what he says is true I won’t go there’.

b Mir ist das Feuer ausgegangen.
(to-me is the fire gone out)
‘The fire has gone out “to me”’.

c He stole the book on me. (Hiberno-English)
‘He stole the book which I had in my possession/charge’.

The preposition ‘to’ is not the only one which may be involved in this type of construction. ‘On’ may also be used here as in

(20) Múchadh an tine orm.
(extinguish-ANONYMOUS\(^{11}\) the fire on-me)
‘The fire was put out on me’.

(Standard English)

One effect of the Pertinenzdativ is that it frequently occurs redundantly with the subject of a sentence. Thus in German one has sentences such as

(21) Ich dachte mir, du würdest kommen.
(I thought to-me you would come)
‘I thought you would come’.

In Irish the possibilities of expressing the subject of an action with a preposition leads to a non-finite form of the verb being used without loss of person specification. In the first
of the following sentences English can use an absolute construction with a gerund governed by a possessive pronoun in this construction however.

(22) a  
\textit{Ag fágáil an tí dom bhuail mé léi.}  
(at leave–VN the house-GEN to-me hit I with-her)  
‘On my leaving the house I met her’.

b  
\textit{Rugadh mac dí.}  
(born-ANONYMOUS son to-her)  
‘She gave birth to a son’.

In (22)b the verb form is not strictly speaking non-finite but simply not marked for person. Here one then has a prepositional pronoun which serves the function of encoding the subject.

The fact that several prepositions are sometimes possible with a single construction has let to them being exploited for semantic purposes. The difference is one of different types of location or direction in Irish syntax which has to be expressed by a variety of lexical verbs in English.

(23) a  
\textit{Ná rab fhior dhuít é!}  
(may-not-be true to-you it)  
‘I hope you are wrong’.

b  
\textit{Ní fior liom é.}  
(is-not true with-me it)  
‘I don’t believe it’.

The exploitation of this situation is quite advanced on Irish and shifts the task of lexical distinction away both from verbs and nouns onto the prepositional pronouns. In such cases a given preposition can be associate with a certain semantic content so that there is an amount of productivity involved. For example the preposition \textit{faoi} ‘under’ is used to express derision as in

(24)  
\textit{Ná bí ag magadh faoi.}  
(not be at mock-VN under-him)  
‘Don’t be mocking him’.

A fact which is then exploited for the purpose of contrast in constructions such as those in

(25)

a  
\textit{Rinne sí gáire liom.}  
(did she laugh with-me)  
‘She laughed with me’.

b  
\textit{Rinne sí gáire fúm.}  
(did she laugh under-me)  
‘She laughed at me’.

As might be expected prepositions can not only contrast across different constructions but also occur within a single phrase. In such cases the prepositions used are quite clearly defined in their semantic role, that is the association which a preposition may have is strictly adhered to in sentences where two prepositions stand side by side. The
preposition stand side by side. The preposition *le* ‘with’ is used to express attitude on the part of the subject (see (23)b which operates this use) and *do* ‘to’ for relevance as has just been discussed. The two can be found together contributing their characteristic meaning as in

\[(26) \quad \text{a} \quad Is \ moch liom duit \ é. \\
\quad \text{(is early with-me to-you it)} \\
\quad \text{‘I think it is too early for you’.} \\
\quad \text{b} \quad Ní \ mór leis di \ é. \\
\quad \text{(is-not big with-him to-her it)} \\
\quad \text{‘He doesn’t begrudge her it’}.
\]

An expected consequence of this possibility of combination is that preposition would occur within a single phrase in which they are co-referential. There are in-deed cases of this. Just as with the non-co-referential use of two prepositions the semantic role of the preposition is well defined. In the following the preposition *ó* ‘from’ is employed in combination with the adjective *fada* ‘far’ to express the idea of missing and the preposition *le* ‘with’ convey the notion of attitude on the part of the subject. The direct object of the English equivalent turns up as the subject surface (surface syntactically) of the copula construction.

\[(27) \quad Is \ fada liom uaim \ í. \\
\quad \text{(is far with-me from-me she)} \\
\quad \text{‘I miss her a lot’}.
\]

The fact that a major portion of the semantic content of lexicalised verbs may be carried by prepositions in the Irish has rendered it possible to delete the verb which is present normally in the given sentence. Note that such deletion does not occur for reasons of ellipsis as it does in English for example but because of the superfluity of a verbal element. Take to begin with an example with the preposition *chuig* ‘towards’ where its presence in a phrase renders a verb of motion superfluous.

\[(28) \quad Seo chugainn í. \\
\quad \text{(here towards-us the)} \\
\quad \text{‘Here she comes (towards-us)’}.
\]

The preposition *faoi* ‘under’ when used with a verbal complement (as opposed to its being a prepositional complement to a verb as in (24) and (25)b expresses an intention on the part of the speaker or the necessity to make a decision. This semantic content, found in (29)a can then be employed in a verb less construction such as (29)b.

\[(29) \quad \text{a} \quad Tá fúm teach a thógáil. \\
\quad \text{(is under-me house COMP build)} \\
\quad \text{‘I intend to build a house’}.
\]

\[(29) \quad \text{b} \quad Fúithi féin atá sé. \\
\quad \text{(under-her herself that-is it)} \\
\quad \text{‘It’s up to herself’}.
\]

Finally, it can be shown how the meaning of a preposition can be extended to no longer be simply a component of a phrase or a sentence but to represent the latter on its own. To
illustrate this take the preposition *chuig* ‘towards’ which through its literal meaning came to represent a warning of approaching danger for a person who was then expressed in the syntactic pronominal form of the preposition. This results in one of word phrases such as

(30) a  *Chugat!*
     (towards-you)
     ‘Look out!’.

At the same time the preposition *le* with is used with verbs of motion to indicate departure of a person. It can also be found (as can the corresponding preposition in English incidentally) with an adverb of motion but without a verb as in the second of the following examples.

(31) a  *Imigh leat! Amach leat!*
     (leave with-you) (out with-you)
     ‘Go away!’; ‘Out with you!’.

The combination of these two figurative meaning of ‘towards’, and ‘with’ is the found in a verb less construction which expresses a warning to depart.

(32)  *Chugaibh libh!*
     (towards-you PL with you-PL)
     ‘Get out of here!’.

Notes

3. That is with regard to the origin of this aspect of Irish syntax. For a substratum theory see Pokorny (1927, 1928, 1930).
4. See Ó Cuív (1951) for an assessment of the Irish dialect areas of the present and historical information also.
5. See Greene (1966: 30ff.) for further details of what is meant by this.
6. In a language where there is no discernible semantic distribution the nominalization may be confined to a higher register as in German cf. *etwas erfahren* → *in Erfahrung bringen*, (irgendwen) *an etwas erinnern* → *in Erinnerung rufen*.
7. The term ‘verbal noun’, abbreviated in the glosses to VN refers to a non-finite verb form which is roughly equivalent to the infinitive or present participle of English. The verbal adjective of adjective is abbreviated VA in this paper.
8. For a list of their manifestations in standard Irish see Christian Brothers (1966: 83) and actual spoken forms (of Western Irish) de Bhaldraithe (1953: 140ff).
11. What being used here is a finite verb from which is not marked for person. Normally English glosses of this Irish form have the passive but this is only an approximation. See Hickey (1983) for further comments on this.
References