

Diachronic factors and the animacy hierarchy in Old Irish  
 Oral Presentation  
 Theme session 2: Typological hierarchies in synchrony and diachrony

Old Irish has a set of enclitic pronouns which may optionally attach to person- and number-marked constituents, i.e. verbs, conjugated prepositions, and possessed NPs:

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| (1) a. dó(=som)<br>to.3SG.M./N.(=3SG.M.)<br>“to him” | b. a=mac(=si)<br>3SG.F.=son(=3SG.F.)<br>“her son” | c. biru(=sa)<br>carry.1SG.(=1SG.)<br>“I carry” |
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Pronominal objects are also marked on the verb in Old Irish, and these clitics may agree with the object. As noted in Griffith (2008), however, only one such clitic may appear on the verb, and it must agree with the argument highest on the animacy hierarchy: 1<sup>st</sup> person > 2<sup>nd</sup> person > 3<sup>rd</sup> person animate > inanimate:

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| (2) a. no=m·bir(=sa/*su)<br>PVB=1SG..carry.2SG.(=1SG./*2SG.)<br>“you (sg) carry me” | b. ata·cí(=su/*si)<br>PRV.3SG.F..see.2SG(=2SG./*3SG.F.)<br>“you (sg) see her” |
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The only proposal treating the diachronic development of this hierarchy is Griffith (2011). His claims are plausible on the whole, though they rely on a number of assumptions that are difficult or impossible to prove (e.g. the argument status of the clitics, the chronology of cliticization), and he does not address why only one such clitic appears after the verb. If two clitics were allowed, there would be no hierarchy.

Now, if we follow Schrijver (1997: 18-25) and assume that these clitic pronouns have a deictic origin, an answer to this problem presents itself. It appears that the change in meaning from deictic to pronominal was rather late. Presumably, having two clitics of conflicting deixis attached to the same verbal form was problematic. Only one was allowed. After the rather late transition to pronominal meaning, the restriction remained in place.

It still remains to explain why the one available clitic agreed only with the argument topmost on the animacy hierarchy. We can adopt a suggestion from Griffith (2011): the clitic pronouns serve to indicate topicality. Since 1<sup>st</sup> persons are more topic-worthy (Wierzbicka 1981), when there was competition between two potentially topical elements, only the highest was permitted. While this explanation appears to replace one hierarchy with another and thus may seem circular, the topic-based account appears to have more explanatory power than the animacy-based one.

In summary, this paper notes a case of the animacy hierarchy in Old Irish and presents language-specific arguments for a diachronic pathway leading to this state of affairs. Due to the deictic origins of the pronouns, only one could appear on a given verb. The inherent topic-worthiness of the arguments then determines which clitic may appear on that verb.

References

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