

*Subject Positions in Old Irish – SUBMITTED FOR TALK*

This paper presents new research into the position of Subjects in Old Irish, a language that is frequently described as being VSO (see Newton 2006 for discussion). In fact, however, there seem to be various post-verbal positions for subjects, so that a blanket description of the language as VSO appears to be descriptively inadequate. Not only are there at least two post-verbal positions, which are distinguished by a type of high-adverb that I call ‘demarcating adverbs’ and specialized for different types of subjects, there are also various indications that VP-fronting (in verbal clauses) or predicate-fronting (in non-verbal clauses) is available under certain conditions.

(1) *ce fodailter [ni bes miniu] iarum oc techt do laim ...*  
although is.distributed something COP.WH less after at going to hand  
“Although something less is later distributed at the communion...” (TP 2, 254.16)

(2) *Ferais iarum [Dubthach] failte moir fri Patraic.*  
poured after Dubthach welcome great to Patrick  
“Dubthach gave great welcome to Patrick.” (LH, 96.10)

(3) ... *nach cometesta dó [ceith folam] deit.*  
not.subord. is.indulged.sbj to.3S even empty.thought to.2S  
“...that even an empty thought should be indulged in by you.” (MT, 151.62)

In a corpus of approximately two thousand Parsed Old and Middle Irish sentences (the POMIC), pre-adverbial subjects, like that in (1) are found in only twelve instances. The majority of these pre-adverbial subjects are, quantified (existential *ní* ‘something’, universal *cách* ‘each’, or numerals) phrases with wide-scope, generic bare indefinites or specific indefinites. The post-adverbial subjects, on the other hand, are overwhelmingly definite, as in (2), or explicitly focalized, with the focus particles *acht* or *cid*, as in (4).

(4) *Nicon tuilid immurgu [cid a oen bande folae] ass.*  
Not flows however [even PTC one drop blood.gen out.3S  
“Not a single drop of blood, however, flows out of it.” (MT, 150.61)

An investigation into negation/quantifier scope interactions helps to show that the pre-adverbial position is specialized for material that must take wide-scope, while the post-adverbial position is reserved for elements that are must take narrow-scope, such as the focus particles like *cid* in (4), which are NPIs, and therefore must in the scope of negation. Contrast this with (5), where *and* counts as a demarcating adverbial.

(5) *Nicon [ibthar lind dermait Dé] and.*  
Not will.be.drunk liquid forgetfulness.gen god.gen therein  
“A [specific] liquid that causes forgetfulness of God will not be drunk therein.” (MT, 129.6)

That this must be interpreted with wide-scope relative to the negative is indicated by the immediately following sentence (6), in which it is clear from the referential pronoun that (5) induces a presupposition of existence.

(6) *‘Maith’ ol Duiblitir ‘ibth-i mo muindter sa.’*  
well said Duiblitir will.drink-it my people 1S

“Well”, Dublithir said, “my people will drink it.” (MT, 129.6)

(4-6) show that indefinite subjects can occur below demarcating adverbs but only where they are interpreted as having narrow-scope. This is quite reminiscent of facts about indefinite subjects in Germanic languages, which have been widely discussed since Diesing (1992), see for instance the discussion in Svenonius (2002) as well as Bentzen (2009), among many others.

Unlike post-adverbial subjects, VP-fronting examples show a variety of subject types: definites (7), bare indefinites (8), quantified phrases (9) and focalized phrase (see 3). However, the majority of VP-fronting examples occur with passive or unaccusative verbs, as in (7-8), as well as (3).

(7) ... *do-gentar fris iarum [an eola sin]*.  
will.be.done to.3S after the experience that  
“That experience will be done to him afterwards.” (MT, 148.58)

(8) *A-t-bathatar dend aine sin [sruithi] iar sir-cacht do Chorgis*.  
died.3P of-the fast that old.men after long-privation of Lent.  
“Old men died of that fast, after the long privation of Lent.” (MT, 156.68)

(9) *Ni théid do méis, ol sesem, [nech diob] ...*  
not goes to table said he any of.them  
“None of them come to the table, said he ...” (MT, 133,16)

Judging from the position of demarcating adverbs in such examples (consider for instance 7 and 10), as well as the scopal properties of the quantified and bare indefinites (8) and (9), the position to which the VP raises seems to be very similar to that occupied by specific indefinites and other wide-scope quantifiers. For instance, the bare indefinite in (8) is not interpreted generically, unlike pre-adverbial bare indefinites, nor is the existential quantifier in (9) interpreted as having wide-scope relative to negation.

I argue that the subject-type/adverb-position interaction and scope diagnostics show that Old Irish possessed a fine-grained vP (and possibly TP) area that resembles, in some of its outlines, cross-linguistic observations that have been widely discussed. I suggest that, in light of such data, as well as other data offered by DiGirolamo & Courtney (2012), the description ‘VSO’ for Old Irish is misleading, and that its clause structure is in fact similar in many important ways to more well-known, modern, European languages.

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