

FUNCTION, FORM, AND PHONE
NOMINAL SYNCRETISM IN ENGLISH AND IRISH

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It is common in diachronic descriptions of the better known Indo-European languages like English to describe syncretism in essentially phonological (or, somewhat more recently, morphophonemic) terms, as proceeding from 'weakened phonetic environments', 'loss of morphological distinctions', or the like.¹ Prokosh's statement that 'phonetic laws are the most common cause of syncretism' (1938: 230) is typical of the views of the great historical linguists whose thorough, even exhaustive studies of phonology and morphology still provide the substance for contemporary histories of such languages. Hoenigswald, in another typical statement concerning syncretism (1960: 36), defines syncretism as 'a particularly interesting form of merger which exists when morphs which originally contrast recur, at the later state, in phonemically corresponding shape but in complementary distribution and therefore as co-allomorphs.'

What both of these analyses lack, however, is a consideration of what Uriel Weinreich, William Labov, and Marvin Herzog (1968) have called the principles of embedding and actuation: for any putative change in language there must be explanations of how a given structure is embedded in the social and linguistic framework of any state of a language--how, in other words, the phenomenon isolated for study functions within the totality of language, and ways of predicting the actuation of language and, retrospectively, of describing why change X took place in the particular time, place, and social-psychological environment it did. Since it is a commonplace, and, on the whole, an accurate one, that languages do not lose mechanisms by which valued distinctions are drawn, it has been assumed that the loss induced by syncretism is typically compensated by the 'development' of new mechanisms such as specialized syntactic structures, different morphological markers, and distinctive stress patterns. However, even in phonologically-based theories of language, arguments have occurred as to the order of these two phenomena, syncretism and development--consider the long-standing controversy in English historical linguistics regarding the loss of case-endings in Late Old English and the establishment of more restrictive syntactic patterns typical of later English.

I would like today to discuss nominal syncretism within the two language families of the British Isles, Celtic and Germanic. At the beginning of their respective historical periods, English and Goidelic Celtic (represented here by Old Irish) each had left five of the eight Indo-European cases. One, the vocative, functions in a way different from the other 'grammatical' and 'concrete' cases, and is thus in a sense outside the system. In the course of the historical period, three of these four cases—nominative, accusative, dative—fell together so that in the modern forms of both languages, there is a distinction only between the genitive form and everything else. (The original sources of the dative morphologies, their historical relations to the PIE dative, instrumental, ablative, and locative, are irrelevant to this discussion.) The convergence of these three, originally separate case-forms, however, was not simultaneous centering of all three forms but a succession of two bilateral conflations. Curiously, it was the dative and accusative that first fell together in English, whether in verbal or prepositional object positions, while in Irish it was the nominative and accusative. It is the thesis of this paper that these particular conflations were not accidental, but were the result, perhaps a result predictable on typological grounds, of the interaction of a set of syntactic processes. Thus the nominal syncretism evidenced in medieval Irish and English is a secondary phenomenon, a phonological reduction of inflections which had already been rendered redundant by syntactic specialization.

I will be concerned with the processes of complementation (of the type where the complement verbal is rendered nonfinite), raising of lower NPs into higher sentences, topicalizations of various types, and subject-and topic-marking.² I have already discussed a number of the major features of these processes in both branches of Celtic (Huntsman to appear a and b), and all that discussion need not be repeated here. Some sketch of the situation in Celtic is necessary, however, for the contrast with English to be apparent.

It is commonly assumed that later Proto-Indo-European had a surface case-marking system that was, in some part at least, founded on semantic distinctions like Agent, Experience, Instrument, Source, Goal, Locative, and so forth. In early Proto-Indo-European simplex sentences, however, nonclitic subjects were often not manifested (Lehmann 1974 39-48). The unmarked choice for subject was Agent, if one was available, and the typical case inflection for the Agent (the nominative)

appeared on the subjects of both transitive and intransitive verbs if the referents of the NPs were felt to possess the ability to cause the action denoted by the verb. The typical nonagentive case inflection (the accusative) appeared on the subjects of certain other intransitives and on the objects of transitives.³ Whatever the original situation, in time the semantic distinctions blurred and the nominative inflection typically became associated chiefly with the surface relation subject.⁴

In Old Irish the inflectional situation is familiar. Thurneysen states that 'the nominative functions as case of the subject and as predicative nominative' (1946 155), while Lewis and Pedersen do not even mention the nominative at all in their discussion of case (1961 161 65). In simplex sentences the NP in the nominative case is normally the Agent, if one is present, then Experiencer, Source, Instrument, Goal, and so forth in a hierarchy generally familiar from other languages. Nonindependent subjects are normally indicated by inflection, possibly emphasized by redundant suffixed pronouns, and pronominal objects are usually infixes.

- (1) pridchim soscèle
preach-I gospel
'I preach the gospel'
- (2) no-an- buir -sa
him carry-I I
'I carry him'

With independent subjects and objects, the order is VSO, an order which, generally speaking, is absolute during the Classical Old Irish period.

- (3) berid int sacart inn lieic
carries-he the priest the stone
'the priest carries the stone'

For nonemphatic simplex sentences, the topic of the sentence seems to have been the subject. For contrast or emphasis, however, a different topic could be marked with a structure that is for all practical purposes identical to the English Cleft—the topic NP (even a nonfinite verbal) appears left-most in the sentence, preceded by a tense-carrying copula.⁵

- (4) is airi am cimbid -sa [Wb 27^c22]
 is-it for-it am-I a-prisoner I
 'It is on this account I am a prisoner'
- (5) is nan- aicci ataf [Wb 5^c27]
 is-it in-their fosterage are-you
 'it is in their fosterage you are'
- (6) is oc precept soscéli att6 [Wb 21^c19]
 is-it at preaching of-gospel am-I
 'it is preaching the gospel I am'

The structure illustrated by (6) differs from the equivalent English gerundive in that the NP with the genitive inflection is not the subject of the underlying sentence but the object.⁶ The underlying subject (Agent) is marked with the preposition do 'to' which otherwise as expected from its etymology, designates Goal or Purpose

- (7) a bhéim dom
 his beating to-me
 'my beating him'
- (8) dénum maith dúnna
 doing of-good to-us
 'our doing good'
- (9) a fulang dom -sa [Wb 17^c26]
 their tolerating to-me me
 'my tolerating them, my toleration of them'

We may now approach a peculiarity of Old Irish nominative case-marking not mentioned earlier Thurneysen states that

the nominative is also employed where a noun stands in no precise syntactical relationship. Such a nominative is often placed before a clause in which its syntactical relationship is then specified by a pronoun, e.g., comthínol (nom sg) inna noib--as-berr tempul doib hore atreba Crist indib 'the congregation of the saints, they are called "a temple" (lit. "'temple" is said of them') since Christ dwells in them' Wb 21^c7 (1946 155)

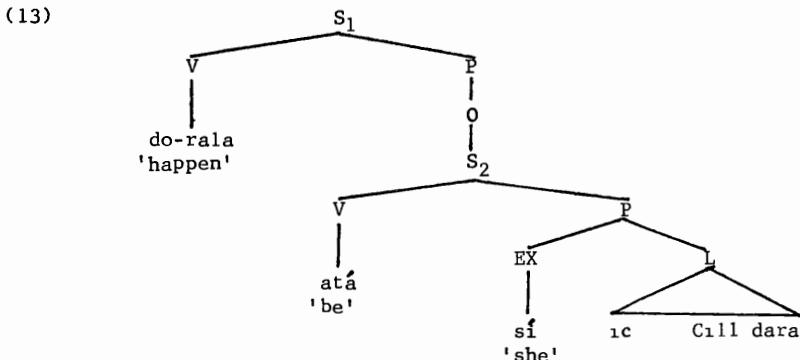
While Thurneysen's example may be some kind of left-dislocated structure where the nominative is simply the unmarked case, others may not be so explained. Consider first the Old Irish raising verb do-rala (MnIr tarla) which is formally the subjunctive and preterite suppletion of do-cuirethar 'put'. As in the complements in (7-9), the Agents of the underlying sentences are treated as if they were objects — they are infixes as pronouns or marked by the preposition do.

- (10) co n da-s- rala for combáig comimrama
 so-that them began-it on competing in-rowing
 "so they began to compete in rowing" [LL 235^a20]
- (11) do-rala do B beith ag saigdeoracht
 happened-it to B being at archery
 'B happened to be at archery' [Nennius 38]

A clear history of this kind of raising appears in the early ninth century sentence in (12), whose underlying structure is sketched in (13).

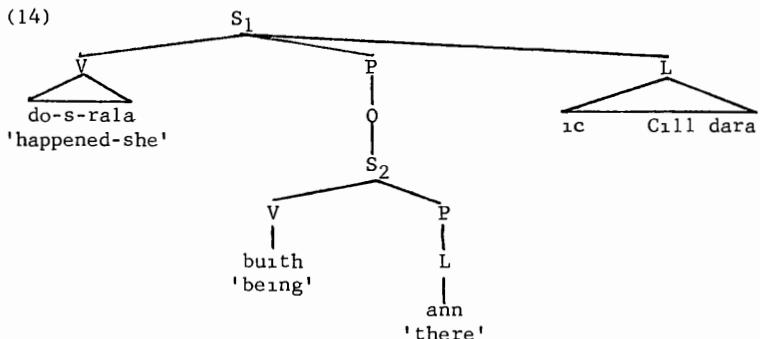
- (12) is ann do-s- rala sede, ic Ross na Ferta
 is-it in-it her happened-it it at Ross na Ferta
 'it is there she happened to be , at Ross na Ferta

i Cill dara [Broccán's Hymn, Thes Pal 2 343 29]
 in Kildare
 in Kildare'



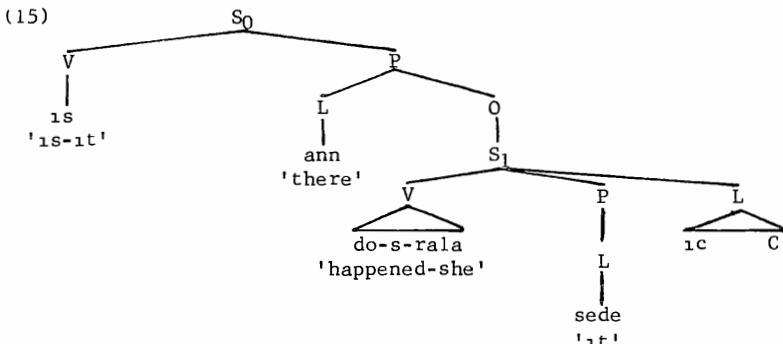
On the first cycle that we are concerned with, the lower verb is complementized and the raised subject becomes the infix object of the upper verb, do-rala. Since the original topic (the subject) has been removed, the only remaining NP, the Locative, becomes the new topic. Because of a constraint against 'heavy' or 'complex' clause-internal constituents, the Locative is extraposed, leaving the pronoun copy ann 'there'

(14)



The complementized substantive verb, as is usual although not obligatory, is deleted and S_2 is pruned. After topicalization, the structure is as in (15), with the nominative masculine singular emphasizing pronoun sede, an enclitic that is always coreferential with the subject, left as a copy of the topicalized ann.

(15)



Thus, a natural result of raising out of subject complements appears to be the creation of a new topic, since the former topic of the complement sentence, the subject, becomes the object of the raising verb

Consider now verbs with object complements, as in (16) and (17)

- (16) at-bert Cu Chulainn a eich do gabail do
 ordered Cu Chulainn his horses (npl) for catching to-him
 'Cu Chulainn ordered his horses to be caught for him'
 [LL MU 47]

- (17) do-murinet sochraide na hapstail conid
 think many the apostles (npl) that-it-is
 'many think the apostles speak every language'

as cach berla rolabairset [Leabhar Breac 5485]
 out-of every tongue speak-they

In each of these cases, the NP raised from the complement is marked by the nominative inflection although it is clearly not the subject. I suggest that these raised NPs, as in the subject complement sentences, are in fact new topics and that the nominative inflection denotes, not subjecthood, but topicality. There are, to be sure, examples of sentences like (18) where the NP raised from an object complement is in the accusative

- (18) n̄f fitir in mnai dia brath [Saltair na Rann 3207]
 not knew-he the woman to-his betraying
 'he knew not that the woman was betraying him'

The variation is made possible, of course, by the various functions the NP has in the course of the derivation. In a matrix sentence with a raised object, that NP is both object of the higher verb and the new topic. During the Old Irish period the data are mixed, but the historical development is clear: the accusative steadily gives way to the nominative, and the topic, formerly marked by ambiguous inflections, becomes marked merely by position, as 'subject' directly after the verb or as 'object' at the head of a reduced complement.

As far as the processes under discussion here are concerned, Late Old English was quite like Modern English. The order of major elements was SVO in declarative simplexes with full

nominal NPs, and only in certain specialized structures in narration and emphasis, and after certain adverbs, did the verb precede the subject. The rules for raising to subject and object were also essentially like those for Modern English, and there seems little point in adducing examples now. Morphologically, there were distinctions between the dative and accusative singular in the masculine and neuter a, wa, and ja stems, the neuter long i stems, and the minor declension of neuter n, es and os stems, and the four nouns of the b stem.⁷ All other feminine nouns, except the long i stems, are identical in the dative and accusative singular, as are the short i stems, the n stems, and the r stems. Finally, the u stems, where there was an original distinction between the -u of the nominative/accusative and the -a of the dative (and genitive), also became indistinguishable in the period under scrutiny here because of a centralization of both inflections to <e>, which was presumably a [ə]. The chronology of the phonological reduction in the inflections, however, makes it certain that the loss of the distinction between dative and accusative was not a phonologically motivated process. The change of final m, as in the dative plural, had already begun in Old English well before the loss of final n and the centralization of final a/o/u. Further, the syncretism of dative and accusative singular is attested in numerous manuscripts which do not show the loss of final e, and the parallel syncretism of the dative and accusative plural can in no way be explained on purely phonological grounds. (The typical 'explanation' for the latter change is analogy.) After all these processes were all underway, perhaps largely completed (and the essentially conservative scribal tradition would have tended to preserve some of these older markers long after they had ceased to be pronounced), a final e was added to the nominative singular of the feminine jo stems and the long o stems, bringing those declensions into line with the masculines.⁸ (Moore 1928) While this syncretism occurred after prepositions as well (Blakeley 1947), the major force appears to have been felt in the post-verbal, raised object position, where the dative appears very rarely after the early Middle English period (Mustanoja 1960: 101).

Even with Old English verbs that normally take the dative, such as the cautive do, give, and let, the accusative is often found. Note the accusatives in (19), (20), and (21) beside the datives in (22) and (23).

- (19) Moyses ȝef þan folke drincken [Lamb Hom 129 2, Visser 4 2260]
 'Moses made the people drink'
- (20) does þa fyrhta [Ags Laws 410 Jud Dei IV c 1, Visser 4 2257]
 'makes them tremble'
- (21) he let hine don , [Chron an 1126, Visser 4 2261]
 'he made him do
- (22) se arcebiscop leot him locon [Chron an 963, Visser 2261]
 'the archbishop made him look,
- (23) do him drincan [Aelfric Saints 464 376, Visser 4 2257]
 'make him drink'

The examples can be multiplied easily (Visser has dozens, as you might well expect). As with the Irish situation, the direction of the process is clear – the dative steadily gives way to the accusative in exactly those positions where no contrast in function is possible. Of course, it can be argued that for English the syntactic processes do not cause or perhaps even allow the syncretism by themselves, merely that they do not prevent syncretism. That argument, however, does not explain why the nominative should have remained distinct (as in the plurals) when there was no potential confusion whatsoever, since nominative-marked NPs were found almost exclusively in subject position. By comparing the developments in English and Irish, however, the reasons become clear, and perhaps even predictable on typological grounds. Whether the collapse came between nominative and accusative, as in Irish, or between dative and accusative, as in English, syncretism occurred first with exactly those inflections that formerly marked NPs whose syntactic functions in surface structures (where case-marking occurs), although originally distinct, had become similar or identical through transformational coalescence.

NOTES

¹ Recently some attention has been given to other causes of syncretism, e.g. Stillman 1973

² Obviously the characterization, and indeed the existence, of some of these processes will depend on the variety of generative theory one espouses. Although in other contexts I could

argue for the theoretical superiority of a generative semantic case grammar with an unordered base, I have attempted to couch my argument here in terms that would be meaningful within both standard and basic theories and their most common variants

3 The lack of distinction between the nominative and accusative for Indo-European neuter nouns is a typical and familiar piece of evidence for this hypothesis

4 The evidence presented by Lehmann 1974 establishes that, at the very least, more than one set of organizing principles were operable in the earliest attested Indo-European languages like Hittite and Sanskrit

5 For these purposes, the NP may or may not follow a preposition

6 Cf John's shooting of the hunters
 *the hunter's shooting by John

7 The history of the root consonant stems is too complicated to deal with here

8 The exceptions to this schema were the n stems which were in the process, not of gaining an n in the nominative singular, but of losing n's elsewhere, and, of course, all the neuters for which there had never been a nominative/accusative distinction

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