

The Loss of Modal Particles in Early Modern Irish

This poster presents some results of ongoing research on the history of subject positions in Irish. A previous DiGS paper (Lash 2013) showed that Old and Middle Irish had at least two subject positions that could be distinguished by observing the position of subjects relative to a class of particles termed 'demarcating adverbs', which shared many characteristics with Germanic and Romance Modal Particles (Coniglio 2008). One of the key observations for Old and Middle Irish is that pre-modal-particle subjects represent old information and subjects after the adverbials/modal particles represent new information. The presence of these two subject positions and their correlation with information-structural distinctions is striking in light of the fact that Modern Irish does not possess either the modal particles relevant to distinguishing between these two particular subject positions nor a correlation between subject position and information structure. The two subject positions mentioned in McCloskey (1996:269-270) are distinct from the older subject positions. In this paper, I will discuss the subsequent history of the modal particles using a corpus of texts from the 7th to the 17th centuries. I show that the use of the particles was, with a few exceptions, declining throughout the early modern period (1200-1700 for Irish) and the loss of such particles was essentially completed by the 18th century. Furthermore, I argue that their utility in demarcating the boundary between two subjects positions had been weakened previously to their loss, by the rise of new constructions for marking information structure.

More specifically, I argue that in the Old Irish period the clause structure was as given in (1), in which the verb, at the beginning of the sentence has moved to C and the two subject positions are separated by a projection hosting the modal particles, here designated AdvP. It is important to note that the subject positions are in the so-called 'middlefield' and not in the left periphery. At this stage, the two positions were clearly differentiated and they had two broadly different functions: subject-1 was for 'old' information (continued topics or aboutness topics) while subject-2 was for 'new' information (switch topics or certain types of focus). This is similar to the pattern seen in various Germanic languages (van Kemenade and Milicev 2012, Bayer 2012).

(1) [CP [V-C] [FP SUBJECT-1("Old") F [AdvP ADV [TP SUBJECT-2("New") T ...

I claim that in contexts that lacked a subject in subject-1, either because the subject was in subject-2 or because the subject was a null-pronominal, the resulting sequence [V-C + ADV] was reanalyzed in such a way that certain modal particles became C elements. Under such conditions, the verb, in C, was possibly reinterpreted as being merged with a higher C-head (Old and Middle Irish appear to have had various C positions, *pace* Newton 2007), although more research is necessary here. After the reanalysis of certain particles as C, the distinction between the two subject positions was lost, or at the very least, blurred, since they were no longer clearly demarcated. In essence, the 'middlefield' became one position.

I show that this change is preceded and possibly influenced by another change which involved the development of a new strategy for marking various types of old

information. In particular, Old Irish had a prepositional phrase *im dála X* (*X* a noun in the genitive case), meaning 'with regard to *X*, concerning' (other phrases of the same meaning were *im dáil/fo dála/fo dáil X*). This phrase was frequently found, in both older (pre-12th century) and later texts, adjoined to TP/VPs, as in (2).

- (2) *Gnísit comuirle im dālai and óglaich.*
did.3P council 'concerning' the warrior.GEN
'They held a council concerning the warrior.' (CMT par.73)

At some point, during the Early Modern period (beginning at the end of the 12th century for Irish), a shortened variant (*dála X*) of the phrase appeared in the left periphery, as in (3).

- (3) *Dála Sir Gyi iarum, do cūaidh in a luing con a trīar rīdiri...*
'concerning' Sir Guy.GEN ADV PTC went.3S into his boat with his three knights
"As for Sir Guy, he went into his boat with his three knights."
(Warwick, p.28,par.2)

I suggest that the use of the *dála* phrase in the left periphery meant that other marking of old information, such as pre-modal particle subjects in subject-1, was in some sense redundant. Thus, the reanalysis of modal particles, obliterating the distinctions between subject-1 and subject-2, could take place.

It is important to note that many examples of the *dála* construction, like (3), may contain instances of the modal particles, such as *iarum*, *trá*, *danó*, etc. In this talk, I argue that in such constructions the left peripheral positions of these particles does not contradict the claim made above that the particles become reanalyzed as a low C position (below verbs in C). Indeed, the claim can be made that the position of the particles in constructions such as (3) continues the Old Irish usage, mentioned in Lash 2013, whereby the particles may take constituent scope rather than sentential scope. In such cases, the particles are not in the AdvP position diagrammed in (1), but rather they are part of an XP constituent, such as the nominal one in (3). Finally, in some of the texts of the later period (15th, 16th century) certain particles, such as *iarum* 'then', and *iomorro* 'however' appear to continue in a demarcating function in a few rare cases, since they occasionally appear after the subject, which itself appears after the verb (V>S>A). It may be said, at least in the case of *iarum*, that this particle was always ambiguous between a true discourse-marking function and a low temporal adverb. Thus the few rare cases of *iarum* in later Irish may not be demarcating at all.

Bayer, J., 2012. From modal particle to interrogative marker: a study of German *denn*. In L. Brugè, A. Cardinaletti, G. Giusti, N. Munaro, and C. Poletto (eds.). *Functional Heads: The Cartography of Syntactic Structures*, vol.7. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 13-28.

Coniglio, M., 2008. Modal particles in Italian. *University of Venice Working Papers in Linguistics* 18: 91-129.

van Kemenade, A. and T. Milićev, .2012. Syntax and discourse in Old and Middle English word order. In D. Jonas, J. Whitman, and A. Garrett (eds.). *Grammatical*

- Change: Origins, Nature, Out comes.* Oxford University Press. pp. 239-55.
- Lash, E. 2013. Subject Positions in Old Irish. Presentation given at DiGS 15, University of Ottawa, August 1-3, 2013.
- McCloskey, J., 1996. Subjects and Subject Positions in Irish. In R. Borsley and I. Roberts (eds.). *The Syntax of The Celtic Languages—A Comparative Perspective.* Cambridge Cambridge University Press. pp. 241–83.
- Newton, Glenda, .2007. "Exploring the Nature of the Syntax-Phonology Interface: A Post-syntactic Account of the Old Irish Verbal System", *Nanzan Linguistics, Special Issue 1.2*: 19-44.