

Some syntactic peculiarities of Irish

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Abstract: This work looks at three syntactic features of Irish, namely the canonical VSO word order, prepositional pronouns and the impersonal passive, that have traditionally been described as typical or unique to Celtic languages. It is argued that these peculiarities can be analysed in the same way as counterpart phenomena in other languages like Spanish, which belongs to the Romance family, by going beyond the morphology of these languages and by thinking of syntheticity as an axis along which the codification of different syntactic relations can be placed within a language as well as across languages.

Keywords: synthetic, analytic, syntactic relations

Resumen: Este trabajo se centra en tres características sintácticas del irlandés, a saber, el orden de palabras canónico VSO, los pronombres preposicionales y la pasiva impersonal, las cuales han sido descritas como típicas o exclusivas de las lenguas celtas. Se arguye que estas peculiaridades se pueden analizar de la misma forma que algunas características sintácticas paralelas en otras lenguas como el español, que pertenece a la familia romance, yendo más allá de la morfología de estas lenguas y entendiendo la sinteticidad como un eje a lo largo del cual se puede situar la codificación de las diferentes relaciones sintácticas tanto dentro de una lengua como entre distintas lenguas.

Palabras clave: sintético, analítico, relaciones sintácticas

1. Introduction: the Celtic family of languages and Modern Irish

The Celtic languages constitute one of the main branches of the Indo-European family. As can be seen in Figure 1, they are not directly related to any other language with which they have been or are nowadays in contact due to geographic or cultural reasons, like Romance languages (such as French) or Germanic languages (such as Old, Middle and Modern English or the Scandinavian languages).

Within the Celtic family, Irish Gaelic belongs to the Goidelic branch and thus, it is sister to both Scottish Gaelic, spoken in Scotland, and Manx, spoken in the Isle of Man.

This work focuses on Irish Gaelic (Irish, hereinafter), also called *Erese* and *Gaeilge*, which is an endangered language and constitutes the national and first official language of the national identity of the Republic of Ireland, as stated in the Article 8(1) of its Constitution (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*).

Not only is Irish the national language of the Republic of Ireland, spoken by 72,000 speakers according to the census of 2006 (although less than 20,000 speakers have Irish as their mother tongue), but it is also spoken in the United Kingdom, where there are 11,900 speakers in Northern Ireland according the census of 2001. Furthermore, there are some small communities of Irish speakers in Canada too. Figure 2 gives a representation of the spread of the Celtic languages in Europe nowadays.

In this work we will be looking at some syntactic characteristics of one Celtic language, more concretely Irish, that have been described as being peculiar to this family of languages (FIFE, 1993; NOLAN, 2012). We will start in section 2 by analysing the canonical word order in Irish, which is different from most known languages and most other Indo-European ones. Contrarily, we will argue that it is in fact quite similar to the canonical word order found in Spanish, once a morphosyntactic parameter is defined (*syntheticity*). In section 3 we will go into the prepositional pronouns typical of Irish, and we will reach the conclusion that these ones are not very different from the prepositional phrases found in other languages either. In section 4 we will move on to the Irish

impersonal passive and show that other languages like Spanish have this kind of constructions too if they are to be analysed at an abstract syntactic level. Finally, we will present the conclusions in section 5.

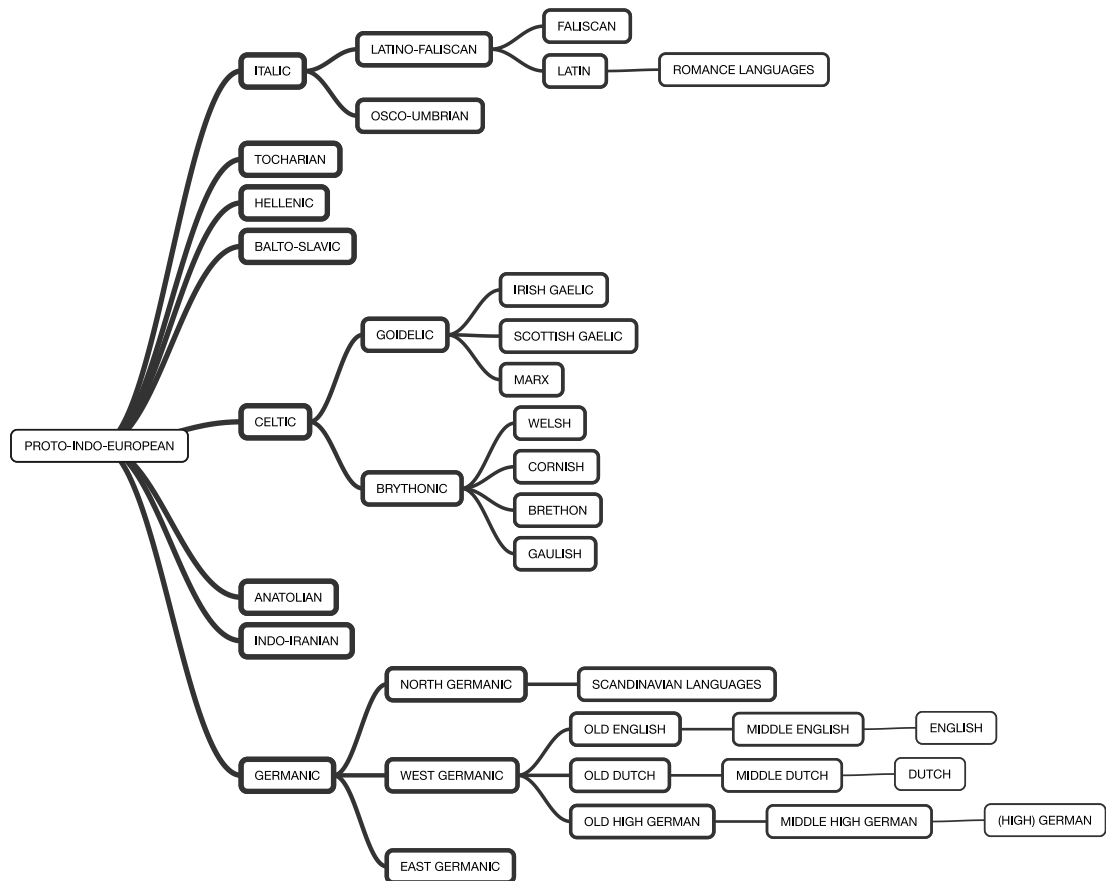


Figure 1: Indo-European languages (simplified) (source: Ethnologue: www.ethnologue.com)

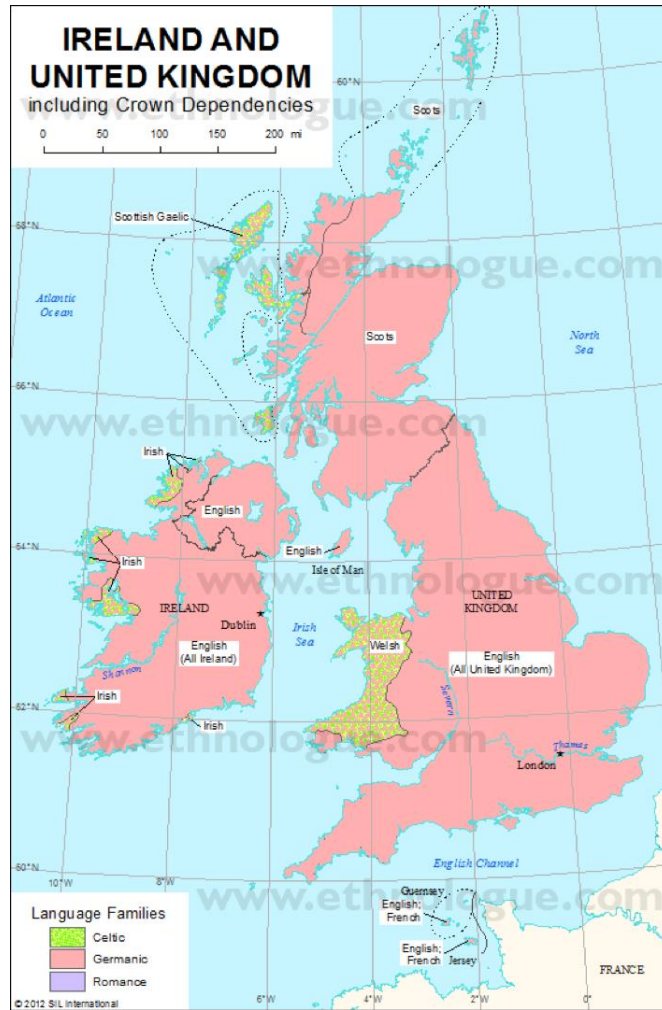


Figure 2: Languages spoken in Ireland and the United Kingdom (source: Ethnologue: www.ethnologue.com)

2. Canonical word order

The canonical word order of a language is the one found in finite clauses (i.e. those specified for time and aspect such as [1a] below *vs.* non finite clauses that are not specified for time nor aspect such as [1b]) with a neutral information structure (i.e. an unmarked topic-focus structure). Irish is a language with an accusative-nominative alignment and with a verb-subject-object canonical word order (VSOX, where X stands for all the complements other than the direct and indirect objects), as can be seen in (2) below

(NOLAN, 2012). This word order is different from the canonical one found in other languages such as English (3) and Spanish (4), which are SVO (although see discussion on word order in Spanish below), or Dutch (5) and German (6), which are SOV.

- (1) a. Susan has just arrived.

[Tense: present / aspect: perfective]

- b. I want to go to the party.

[Tense of the embedded clause: none / aspect of the embedded clause: none]

[Tense of the matrix clause: present / aspect of the matrix clause: unmarked]

- (2) a. Leáigh mé an t-im. (VSO)

Melt_{PST} 1SG DET butter.

“I melted the butter.”

- b. *Mé leáigh an t-im. (*SVO)

1SG melt_{PST} DET butter.

“I melted the butter.”

- (3) a. I ate the apple. (VSO)

- b. *Ate I the apple. (*VSO)

- (4) a. Yo comí la manzana. (VSO)

I ate the apple.

“I ate the apple.”

- b. #Comí yo la manzana. (#VS)

O)

Ate I the apple.

“I ate the apple.”

(5) a. Ik heb de apple gegeten. (SVO
)

I have the apple eaten.

“I ate the apple.”

b. *Heb ik de apple gegeten. (*VS

O)

Have I the apple eaten.

“I ate the apple.”

(6) a. Ich habe den Apfel gegessen. (VSO
)

I have the apple eaten.

“I ate the apple.”

b. *Habe Ich den Apfel gegessen. (*VS

O)

Have I the apple gegeten.

“I ate the apple.”

Irish's canonical word order in (2) above has been one key problem that Celtic languages have posed for formal syntagmatic formation theories, and more concretely for X-Bar Theory (CHOMSKY, 1981). The reason is that they constitute an important exception to the principles of phrase formation that X-Bar Theory defends. Provided that these principles are argued to be universal, the existence of the VSO canonical word order is a

barrier to achieve the typological adequacy pursued by Generative Grammar.

Nonetheless, the verb-subject (VS) word order is attested in many other languages under certain conditions like in Dutch when a phrase is moved to the left periphery in order to mark it as a topic (i.e. given information) and the subject is immediately placed to the right of the verb, as can be seen in (7). The VS word order can also be found in Spanish when the subject is marked as focus (i.e. new information) and the direct object as topic (i.e. given information), as can be seen in (8).

(7) Dat boek heb ik gelezen. (OVS
)

That book have I read.

“I read that book.”

(8) ¿Has leído El Quijote? Ese libro lo he leído yo. (OVS
)

Have read The Quixote? That book CL_{3SG} have read I.

“Have you read Don Quixote? I have read that book.”

What is peculiar to Irish is that the VS word order is the canonical one, that is to say, the unmarked word order and so, the one the language uses as default. It can be seen in (7) and (8) that the VS word order in Dutch and Spanish, respectively, is allowed only when the topic-focus structure is modified: whether the subject becomes the new information (subject focalization) or the object becomes the given information (object topicalization).

Nevertheless, Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou (1998) have argued that some Romance languages are VSO languages if we look at the verbal morphology at an abstract level. More concretely, these linguists defend that the verbal head in these languages encodes not only the number and person agreement with the subject but the subject itself. Roughly,

they have demonstrated that the agreement morphemes of the verb have deictic and referential properties themselves, which makes their nature very similar to pronouns. Hence, the subject (other than the verbal morpheme) is not necessary in Spanish as in (9) unless there is a marked topic-focus structure as in (10), emphasis (11) or the subject is a noun (12).

(9) Me voy. (neutral information structure)

CL_{1SG} go+1SG.

“I’m leaving.”

(10) Yo me voy. (topicalization)

I CL_{1SG} go+1SG.

“I’m leaving.”

(focus on the event of leaving)

(11) Me voy yo. (emphasis)

CL_{1SG} go+1SG I.

“I’m leaving.”

(focus on who is leaving)

(12) Juan se va.

Juan CL_{3SG} go+3SG.

“Juan is leaving.”

Therefore, the syntactic subject in Spanish can be considered agglutinated to the verb by means of a bound morpheme of a pronominal nature. An overt subject in neutral information conditions is allowed only when it is not a pronoun but a noun, as seen in (12) above and (13) below.

- (13) a. Juan se va. (neutral information structure)
Juan CL go+3SG.
“Juan is leaving.”
- b. #Se va Juan. (neutral information structure)
CL go+3SG Juan.
“Juan is leaving.”
- c. ¿Quién se va? Se va Juan. (focalization)
Who CL go+3SG? CL go+3SG Juan.
“Who is leaving? Juan is leaving.”
- d. ¿Quién se va? #Juan se va. (the subject cannot be topic but focus)
Who CL go+3SG? Juan CL go+3SG.
“Who is leaving? Juan is leaving.”

If we thus accept Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou's hypothesis, Spanish can be classified as a VSO language, being it a Romance language not directly related with any Celtic language. The conclusion this far is that both Irish, a Celtic language, and Spanish, a Romance language, have a canonical VSO word order. However, if this hypothesis is to be accepted, Spanish has to be considered a partially *synthetic* language. At least, as regards the codification of the relationship between the subject and the verbal head.

A *synthetic* language, according to Sapir (1921), has a high amount of morphemes per word because such languages realize the grammatical functions within the words. Therefore, synthetic languages are usually highly inflectional, which means that the words have inflections that codify the grammatical functions. On the contrary, *analytic* languages make use of words rather than bound morphemes in order to codify the grammatical functions. Such words are prepositions, auxiliaries and modals, among others. Nowadays, the process of linguistic change is thought of as a process that alters

the language by rendering it more analytic or more synthetic. So the concept of *syntheticity* can be thought of as an axis, and the diachronic evolution moves the position of a given language to a different position along this axis (SCHWEGLER 1990).

Then, what is the peculiarity of Irish in contrast to other languages like Spanish that also have a VSO canonical word order? Irish codifies the relationship between the subject and the verb in an analytic way, i.e. the subject is a word or a free morpheme as can be seen in Table (14). The fact that no other element can intervene between the verb and the subject points towards the possibility of Irish moving to a more synthetic position along the axis, though. Spanish, on the contrary, codifies the relationship between the subject and the verb in a synthetic way by means of a bound morpheme on the verbal head, as can be seen in Table (15).

(14) Subject-verb relationship codification in Irish (SAINERO 1994):

	Singular	Plural
1 st	Leáigh mé	Leáigh muid
2 nd	Leáigh tu	Leáigh sinn
3rd masculine	Leáigh sé	Leáigh sibh
3rd feminine	Leáigh sí	Leáigh siad

(15) Subject-verb relationship codification in Spanish:

	Singular	Plural
1st	Leo	Leemos
2nd	Lees	Leéis
3rd	Lee	Leen

So far, we can conclude that, neither the VSO canonical word order of Irish nor the synthetic codification of the subject-verb relationship of Spanish are unique to these languages. These characteristics can be found across languages. We want to emphasize the combination of these two morphosyntactic features in these two languages. Namely, Irish is a VSO language that codifies the subject-verb relationship in an analytic way, whereas Spanish is a VSO language too, but it codifies the subject-verb relationship in a synthetic way.

3. Prepositional pronouns or inflected prepositions

Another peculiarity of Irish is the use of prepositional pronouns. They are prepositions that are inflected for person, number and gender, as Table (16) shows.

(16) Prepositional pronouns (NOLAN 2012):

	Irish	English	Irish	English
Preposition	Ag	to	Ar	over
1st singular	Agam	to me	orm	over me
2nd singular	Agat	to you	ort	over you
3rd singular masculine	Aige	to him	air	over him
3rd singular feminine	Aici	to her	uirthi	over her
1st plural	againn	to us	orainn	over us
2nd plural	agaibh	to you	oraibh	over you
3rd plural	Acu	to them	orthu	over them

These propositional pronouns are easy to explain if languages are assumed not to be completely synthetic or analytic. Prepositional pronouns are nothing else than a pronoun selected by a preposition. What is peculiar to Irish is that the relationship between the prepositional object (the pronoun) and the preposition is synthetically codified rather than analytically. This is to say that the person, number and gender morphemes of the prepositions in Irish have deictic and referential properties, like the agreement morphemes on the verbs in Spanish (see section 2). In the latter, as well as in other languages like English (see Table [16] above), the relation between the preposition and its object when this is a pronoun is codified analytically by means of a word rather than a bound morpheme.

So, this peculiarity of Irish is not such if the phenomenon is explained in abstract syntactic terms beyond the boundaries of morphology, allowing the codification of certain dependencies either as synthetic or analytic.

The fact that one language codifies a given relation synthetically does not entail that all the other syntactic relations in that language have to be codified synthetically too. In other words, a language like Irish codifies the relationship between the subject and the verb analytically by means of a word rather than a morpheme on the verb (see section 2), while it codifies the relationship between a preposition and its pronominal object synthetically by means of a morpheme on the preposition rather than a word (see Table [16]). Spanish, on the contrary, codifies the relation between subject and verb synthetically by means on a morpheme on the verb rather than a word (see section 2), while it codifies the relation between the preposition and its pronominal object analytically by means of a word rather than a morpheme on the preposition, as can be seen in Table (17).

(17) Pronouns selected by prepositions in Spanish:

	Spanish	English	Spanish	English
Preposition	A	to	sobre	over

1st singular	a mí	to me	sobre mí	over me
2nd singular	a tí	to you	sobre tí	over you
3rd singular masculine	a él	to him	sobre él	over him
3rd singular feminine	a ella	to her	sobre ella	over her
1st plural	a nosotros	to us	sobre nosotros	over us
2nd plural	a vosotros	to you	sobre vosotros	over you
3rd plural	a ellos	to them	sobre ellos	over them

In fact, Spanish does codify the relationship between one of its prepositions and the pronominal prepositional object in a synthetic way. Namely, the relation between the preposition *con* (with) and some personal pronouns, as can be seen in Table (18) below. This is probably reminiscent of Latin, which codifies the relation between the preposition *cum* (with) and the pronominal prepositional objects synthetically too, as can be seen in Table (19) below.

(18) Synthetic and analytic forms of the preposition *con* (with) in Spanish:

	Singular	Plural
1st	Connigo	ANALYTIC FORM (con nosotros)
2nd	Contigo	ANALYTIC FORM (con vosotros)
3rd	Consigo	consigo

(19) Synthetic forms of the preposition *cum* (with) in Latin:

	Singular	Plural
1st	Mecum	nobiscum
2nd	Tecum	vobiscum
3rd	Secum	secum

To sum up, it has been argued that both synthetic and analytic codifications are resorted to in a given language in order to encode different syntactic relations. This reinforces the hypothesis that syntheticity is an axis along which the codification of certain syntactic relations in a language can be placed, regardless of the fact that other relationships in that language may be codified in a different way.

4. The impersonal passive

Irish has two passive constructions: the *periphrastic passive* like that in (20), which is built with one of the copulas, and the *impersonal passive* like that in (21), which does not require the copula and does not show any kind of restriction as to verb selection, being the only restriction of a semantic nature: the implicit subject must be a indefinite agent that is normally human and is codified by means of a verbal morpheme (NOLAN, 2012).

(20) Periphrastic passive in Irish:

Tá an leabhar leite agam.

AUX-PRS DET book read by+1SG.

“This book is read by me.”

(21) Impersonal passive in Irish:

Baineadh asam é.

took_{IMPERSONAL-PASSIVE-PST} from+1SG 3SG.ACC.

“Someone took it from me.”

The impersonal passive in (21) has been considered a peculiar feature of languages belonging to the Celtic family in general, and of Irish in particular, as can be seen in the citation from Fife (1993) below:

“Another shared trait in the verbs is the presence in the paradigm of the ‘impersonal’ or ‘autonomous’ verb form. Basically, all Celtic languages possess an impersonal form for each tense which is neutral as to the person and number features of the subject... While this form can often be translated as a passive... the ending also occurs with intransitive verbs, as with Irish ‘táthar’ ‘they/people are’... The actual usage of these form has diverged significantly over time (in Welsh these have become rather literary constructions, but are everyday forms in Irish), *but the presence of a special verbal inflection for an unspecified subject is another particular feature of Celtic.*” (The emphasis is ours)

Spanish has two kinds of passives too: the *periphrastic passive*, which requires the auxiliary *ser* (be) as that in (22), and the *pasiva refleja*, which does not require any auxiliary but demands the clitic *se* before the verb, as can be seen in (23) (Real Academia Española, 1973).

(22) Periphrastic passive in Spanish:

El libro fue leído (por Juan).

The book was read (by Juan).

“The book was read by Juan.”

(23) Passiva refleja in Spanish:

Se leyó el libro (*por Juan).

CL read the book (*by Juan).

“The book was read (\approx someone read the book).”

The interpretation of the *passiva refleja* in (23) basically coincides with the interpretation of the Irish impersonal passive in (21): both entail the presence of an implicit indefinite agent that is normally human (MENDIKOETXEA, 1999).

If it is assumed that the clitic *se* has the same function as the verbal morpheme of the impersonal passive in Irish, again we find the same syntactic configuration in both languages where the only difference between Irish and Spanish is the syntheticity of the codification of the relation between the verb and the linguistic element that marks the passive. Namely, Irish codifies this relationship by means of a verbal morpheme, this is, synthetically, whereas Spanish codifies this same relation by means of a clitic, in other words, analytically.

5. Conclusions

This work has argued that two languages that belong to different families (Celtic and Romance) are very similar if they are analysed at an abstract syntactic level by thinking of the syntheticity as an axis along which the codification of the different syntactic relations are placed within a language and across languages. Therefore, the syntactic

peculiarities of Irish that have posed problems to formal models for the sake of typological adequacy are not difficult to explain in a unified way without giving up the existing restrictions attested across languages.

Acknowledgments

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