The Two 'be + p.p.' Constructions in Irish (Preface)

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Abstract of Presentation

The Irish language (Celtic, Indo-European) has following linguistic features: the basic word order is VSO; nominals have morphologically two cases (nominative and genitive) and two numbers (singular and plural); the normal case alignment is nominative-accusative type; grammatical functions are normally performed by the word order.

Irish has the construction with *substantive verb **tá** 'is' + verbal adjective **-ta / -te*** (past participle):

1)   ***Tá***   an   leabhar   ***léite***   agam

      be.PRS   the.ART.M.NOM   book.M.NOM   read.PP   at.PREP+I.SG

      'The book is read by me / I have read the book'

[Ó Siadhail (1989: 299)]

Here, the noun phrase *an leabhar* 'the book' comes just after the verb, i.e. occupies the subject position. The grammatical subject is to be interpreted as the patient of the sentence, while the prepositional phrase *agam* 'by me' (< *ag* 'by' + *mé* 'I') denotes the agent.

This construction has been analysed as *the perfective passive* (Ó Siadhail (1989), etc.) or *the ergative construction* in the perfective aspect (Noonan (1994), etc.).

The former conflicts with the acceptability of the construction like (2), with an *intransitive verb*. In (2), the element which occupies the subject position is clearly not the patient.

2)   ***Tá***   sé   ***imithe***

      be.PRS   he.SG.CNJTV   leave.PP

      'He is gone off'

[Ó Siadhail (1989: 300)]

The latter analysis is problematic in the case of (3). In (3), according to Ó Siadhail (1989), the only argument in the construction can be analysed as either *agent* or *patient*.

3)   ***Tá***   sé   ***ite***

      be.PRS   he.SG.CNJTV   eaten.PP

    'It is eaten / He has eaten'

[Ó Siadhail (1989: 300)]

In Irish, transitive verbs can be used without the grammatical object, but it seems that the transitive verb remains transitive in such usage, so it is strange that the subject element with the transitive verb in this construction, like (3), can be interpreted as agent.

To reveal the construction like (3), in this paper, I have researched this construction with the corpus available on the Internet, using two verbs *ith* 'eat' and *ól* 'drink'.

As a result, no human subject seems to appear in the subject position, and it is limited to edible or potable objects, i.e. no agent appears in the subject position. Some examples (5%) lack grammatical subjects, but all of such examples contain prepositional phrases denoting the agent (like ***Tá léite agam***, deleting the subject from (1)). So, in my survey, the element in the subject position is always the *patient*, and I conclude that the 'be + p.p.' construction in Irish has *the ergative* characteristics, not *the perfective passive* one.

Today, I will give a presentation which I would like to do at the 151st Congress of the Linguistic Society of Japan and has been rejected (*twice* in a row).

An Informant H, who was born in Tokyo, in 1980s, drunken, gave me a splendid comment:

'YOUR CONCLUSION IS WEAK.'

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0. Introduction

In Irish[1], there is a construction with the substantial verb *tá* 'be' and the *verbal adjective*, like (1) and (2). The symbols V, S, A and P[2] are added by me.

1) **Tá** _V   an   leabhar _P   **léite**   agam _A

    be.PRS   the.ART.M.NOM   book.M.NOM   read.PP   at.PREP+I.SG

    'I have the book read.'

2) **Tá** _V   sé _S   **imithe**

    be.PRS   he.SG.CNJTV   leave.PP

    'He is gone off'

<div align="right">[Ó Siadhail (1989: 299-300), with his translations]</div>

Ó Siadhail (1989) calls this construction *passive perfective aspect*, which is indicated by its English translation in (1). There are, however, two cases in which this construction is used, i.e. you can see a transitive verb *léite* (< *léigh* 'read') while an intransitive verb *imithe* (< *imigh* 'leave'). In this paper, I would like to reveal its function with the corpus available on the Internet.

For the sake of simplicity, I will use the term *past participle (p.p., and PP in the gloss)* for the *verbal adjective*. The other terms typical to the Irish language, the Goidelic languages or the Celtic languages follow Ó Siadhail (1989) and translations in my survey and all the glosses are responsible to me.

1. Preceding Studies

1.1. Overview

The 'be + p.p.' constructions have been described in various ways.

Here, I will present two of those analyses in following sections:

    a. *The passive perfective aspect* (e.g. Ó Siadhail (1989), §1.2.)

    b. *The ergativity* (e.g. Noonan (1994), §1.3.)

1.2. The Perfective Passive

As mentioned above, Ó Siadhail (1989) calls this construction *the Perfective Passive*. In spite of that, he says that this construction can be applied both to a transitive verb (1) and to an intransitive verb (2) (already cited).

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[1] Indo-European, Celtic, Insular, Goidelic; with 138,000 speakers in Ireland (Ethnologue).

[2] In this paper, I use the terms *agent* and *patient* in broad senses, which simply mention to the subject and the object respectively.

1) ***Tá*** _V `an          leabhar` _P ***léite***   `agam` _A

    be.PRS   the.ART.M.NOM book.M.NOM   read.PP   at.PREP+I.SG

    'I have the book read.'

2) ***Tá*** _V `sé` _S   ***imithe***

    be.PRS   he.SG.CNJTV   leave.PP

    'He is gone off'

                                          [Ó Siadhail (1989: 299-300), with his translations]

Moreover, he pointed out that there is an ambiguity of interpretation in (3).

3') D'ith _V   sé _A   (a   chuid _P) → 3) ***Tá*** _V   `sé` _{A / P}   ***ite***

    eat.PST   he.CNJTV   his.POSS   part.F.NOM   be.PRS   he.SG.CNJTV   eat.PP

    'He has eaten'   'He has eaten / It is eaten'

                                              [Ó Siadhail (1989: 300)]

According to Ó Siadhail (1989), this verb *ith* 'eat' can be used without an object in a certain context, and this makes its corresponding *the perfective passive* example like (3) ambiguous. In other words, it is not clearly known whether the single argument in the clause is an *agent* or a *patient*.

1.3. The Ergativity

Some linguists analyse this construction in Irish as the split *ergativity* in the perfect aspect.

The basic word order in Irish is VSO, where the subject is placed just after the verb and the object follows. As for nouns, the nominative and the accusative functions are morphologically unmarked and distinguished only by the word order.

However, according to this analysis, like Noonan (1994), the different system of the case alignment can be seen in the perfect aspect, in (4b):

4a) ***Chonaic*** _V   `an          garraídóir` _A   `an          gadhar` _P.

     see.PST   the.ART.M.NOM gardener.M.NOM   the.ART.M.NOM dog.M.NOM

     'The gardener saw the dog'

4b) ***Bhí*** _V   `an          gadhar` _P   ***feicthe***   `ag        an          ngarraídóir` _A

     be.PST   the.ART.M.NOM dog.M.NOM   see.PP   at.PREP   the.ART.M.NOM gardener.M.NOM

     'The gardener had seen the dog'

                              [(4a) from my knowledge; (4b) from Noonan (1994: 297)]

In (4a), the agent *an garraídóir* 'the gardener' occupies the verb-after (i.e. subject) position and the patient *an gadhar* 'the dog' follows it. In contrast, in (4b), the patient is moved just after the verb as the subject, and the agent is downcased to the oblique, the prepositional phrase.

With intransitive verbs as well, this analysis as the ergativity seems to be the case, as shown by example (5):

5) **_Tá_** ᵥ | na   mic   léinn | ₛ   **_imithe_**   abhaile   ar   saoire

    be.PRS   the.ART.PL.NOM   son.PL.NOM   learn.VN.M.GEN   leave.PP   home.ADV   on.PREP   feast.F.NOM

    na   Cásca

    the.ART.F.GEN   Easter.F.GEN

    'The students had gone home for Easter'

<div align="right">[Noonan (1994: 297)]</div>

Here, the argument just after the verb (grammatical subject) *na mic léinn* 'the students' is very different from that in (4b) regarding its semantic role. This system can be formularised like following:

Table1: The Irish Split Ergativity

	transitive	intransitive
	transitive	intransitive
Non-Perfect:	V + <u>A</u> + P	V + S
Perfect:	V + P + p.p. + [Prep + <u>A</u>]	V + S + p.p.

2. Questions

Then, which analysis is suitable to describe the Irish 'be + p.p.' construction?

If the first – the analysis as *the perfective passive aspect* is suitable, two different constructions in the single morphosyntactic instance 'be + p.p.' have to be distinguished: one of these denotes *the passive perfective* (transitive) and the other *the active perfective* (intransitive).

However, as mentioned in Ó Sé (1992), this contrast of meaning itself is not surprising. Some languages in western Europe, like French, Italian, German, etc. have contrasts like this, exemplified in French with *être* 'be' + p.p. (6):

6a) Il **_est parti_**.

    'He **has departed**' (perfect) [lit. 'He **is departed**.']

6b) Le fer **_est attiré_** par l'aiment.

    'The iron **is attracted** by the magnet' (passive)

<div align="right">[Tamura et al. (eds.) (2005: 785)]</div>

In these languages, the 'be + p.p.' construction has two functions: the one, in (6a), is the auxiliary verb of *the perfect aspect* with some intransitive verbs, especially denoting actions of movement, changing, appearance, etc., while others take the *have* verb as the auxiliary; the other is *the passive marker*. Has Irish also this use of the auxiliary? If so, a patientless example (3) remains problematic.

Then, how is the second interpretation – the explanation of *the ergativity*?

Taking intransitive examples like (2) into consideration, this is more likely to be the case. However, on patientless examples like (3), which are again problematic, Noonan (1994) does not mention, nor cite any example.

Both two interpretations seem to have a problem.

Even when the patient is deleted from the clause as in (3'), should not *sé* 'he' in (3'), remain an

agent, so that the whole clause remains an transitive clause? And, transforming (3') into (3), should the agent be deleted or downcased?

3') D'ith _V sé _A (a chuid _P) → 3) ***Tá*** _V sé _{A / P} ***ite***

    eat.PST   he.CNJTV   his.POSS part.F.NOM   be.PRS he.SG.CNJTV eat.PP

    'He has eaten'   'He has eaten / It is eaten'

                                                [Ó Siadhail (1989: 300)]

In order to consider by which analysis the Irish 'be + p.p.' construction can be explained more properly, I will carry out the research in the next section.

3. Research

3.1. Methodology

This time, I use the corpus available on the Internet *Nua-Chorpas na hÉireann* (The New Corpus for Ireland), which contains 30 million words (no further information cannot be found because of the dead link), but there are some details in each text.

Using this online corpus, I have searched the following two verbal adjective forms *ite* 'eaten' (< *ith* 'eat') and *ólta* 'drunk' (< *ól* 'drink'), in order to observe the situation surrounding examples such as (3). The data I used are limited only to the texts written *by native speakers* and *originally in Irish* (i.e. not by translation), and to the top 100 examples with the 'be + p.p.' construction respectively (in fact more than 220 examples are found for each verb). After that, I have categorised them according to their constructions: *whether or not agentive prepositional phrases were used*.

3.2. Result

I will present data in the table2:

Table2: The co-occurrence with agentive prepositional phrases

	ite 'eaten'	*ólta* 'drunk'	total
with AGT	81	93	174
without AGT	19	7	26
total	100	100	200

As a result, a large part of examples take agentive prepositional phrases (81% for *ite*, 93% for *ólta* and 87% in total). In (7) you can see the grammatical subject as concrete entities to eat, and in (8) the one as quantities.

7) Nuair a ***bhí*** _V an príomhbhéile _P ***ite***, tháinig

    when.CONJ REL.DIR be.PST the.ART.M.NOM prime.PREF-meal.M.NOM eat.PP come.PST

    an mhilseog.

    the.ART.F.NOM dessert.F.NOM

    'When the main meal ***has been eaten***, the dessert came'

6

8) Níl   a   fhios   agam   <u>cá   mhéad</u>
    NEG+be.PRS his.POSS knowledge.M.NOM at.PREP+I.SG what.PRN+his.POSS many.M.NOM

    <u>deochanna</u> _P a   ***bhí*** _V ***ólta***   <u>agam</u> _A;
    drink.PL.NOM REL.DIR be.PST drink.PP at.PREP+I.SG

    'I don't know how much <u>I</u> ***have drunk***'

These examples have not any (or at least, few) problems, because *the main meal* or *the some quantity of beverage* does not eat or drink something by itself.

Interestingly, there are some examples without any overt nouns in the subject position (i.e. *apersonal construction*), like (9) and (10):

9) '' Ó,   ní   bheidh, ní   bheidh... ***Tá*** _V ☐ _P ***ite*** <u>agam</u> _A cheana.
    oh.INTERJ NEG be.FUT NEG be.FUT be.PRS eat.PP at.PREP+I.SG already.ADV

    '"Oh, no, no... I ***have*** already ***eaten*** Ø.'

10) Nuair   a   ***bhí*** _V ☐ _P ***ite*** is   ***ólta*** <u>acu</u> _A,   chuaigh
    when.CONJ REL.DIR be.PST eat.PP and.CONJ drink.PP at.PREP+they.PL go.PST

    siad   isteach   sa   seomra   suí.
    they.PL.CNJTV inside.ADV in.PREP+the.ART.M.NOM room.M.NOM sitting.M.GEN

    'When they ***had eaten*** and ***drunk*** Ø, they went into the sitting room'

7 examples for *ite* and 4 for *ólta* are found in this survey. Remember that this example, like (3) above, where the grammatical subject can be interpreted as the agent, according to Ó Siadhail (1989). At least, such an example is presented neither in Ó Siadhail (1989) nor in Noonan (1994).

All the examples without a grammatical subject are followed by agentive prepositional phrases, so it might be a counterexample to Ó Siadhail (1989), i.e. perhaps it might be predicted that in the perfect aspect with a single argument, there should be no ambiguity of whether the argument is *the agent* or *the patient*, but it is clearly *the patient*.

However, in my survey, there are also examples like following (11) and (12):

11) ***Bhí*** an   Curraoineach féin   in anchaoi   agus   é   ***ite***
    be.PST the.ART.M.NOM PN self.REFL in_a_bad_way.ADV and.CONJ he.SG.DSJTV eat.VA

    le   cantal.
    with.PREP petulance.M.NOM

    'The Curraioneach himself was a bad temper and ***had eaten*** irritatingly'

12) Tháinig sé   isteach   agus   é   ***ólta***[3].
    come.PST he.SG.CNJTV inside.ADV and.CONJ he.SG.DSJTV drink.VA

    'He came inside and ***had drunk***'

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[3] Here, the main verb *tá* does not appear, but this construction without the verb is corresponding to *the participle construction* in other western European languages.

A lot of example like these cannot be easily interpreted because their preceding contexts cannot be found in the corpus, but these two are, maybe, compatible ones with (3) from Ó Siadhail (1989). Such examples are very few in the survey, however they do exist.

One possible analysis is that only personal pronouns are permitted as the agent in this position, for, at least, within the range of my survey, in all of the examples like (11) and (12), it was the personal pronoun that filled it (8 examples for *ite* 'eaten' and 4 for *ólta* 'drunk'). This point seems to remain a lot to study.

As a whole, it would be quite unlikely that the subject in this construction plays an agent role. In the context without a grammatical subject as well, the agent remains to be easily presented in the form of prepositional phrases, so this construction may be similar to the ergative one as Noonan (1994) mentioned.

4. Conclusion

This time, I limited the data to texts by native speakers and originally written in Irish, but I do not take dialectal variations into consideration (which can be selected in the corpus). It is pointed out that there are quite different varieties among each dialect.

At this point, the website *Gramadach na Gaeilge* (The Grammar of the Irish) describes: With verbs which can be used transitively and intransitively, (in Munster) only 'ag + agent' can appear as well, and the grammatical subject drops (my translation). Here, it is also pointed out that, in Connacht, examples like (11) and (12) do exist.

It will be needed to understand the situation surrounding dialects, somewhat a dialectal continuum including Scottish Gaelic, to achieve an academic success.

Abbreviations (Typical to this study)

ART: definite article / CNJTV: conjunctive pronoun / DIR: direct (relative) / DSJTV: disjunctive pronoun / PN: proper noun / PP: past participle / PRN: pronoun

Reference

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