

A Language at the Edge Irish and the Theory of Grammar

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Introduction

The title of this paper involves a deliberate ambiguity, and that ambiguity is meant to be a rhetorical signal that it is going to try to weave together two rather different narratives.

One of those narratives has to do with languages that are ‘on the edge’ in the sense that they only barely cling to viability and in that their survival is very much in doubt. I want to try to say something about the dilemmas and opportunities that arise when we attempt to do theoretical work (that is, advance theoretical understanding) by working on languages which happen to be in that situation. I think that these questions are important and that they raise a host of issues—some of them ethical and some of them methodological—which are too little discussed. I’ve talked about these questions before and in other places, but I want to return to them here, partly recapitulating things that I have said in other presentations, partly going a little farther. The question is of importance if for no other reason than that the majority of the languages that we might use to investigate the nature of language and of language ability are probably now in this situation.

The other sense of the phrase *language on the edge* that I have in mind has to do with my feeling that Irish has for a long time been **just** beyond the reach of—just at the very edge of—theoretical understanding, close enough to give you the sense that progress is being made, far enough out there to make you understand all too clearly that there are no laurels to rest on and that you have to just keep toiling away as best you can. And that, I think, unlike the first kind of being ‘at the edge’, is a very nice place to be, one of the best places for a language to be, in fact, if what you want is for understanding to be sharpened, deepened, and improved. The problems to be solved do not seem to be hopelessly beyond the capacity of current modes of explanation (they’re within spitting distance), but their solution, to say the least, is not obvious. So you are goaded into doing work, but the goals you can imagine reaching do not seem unimaginably distant.

So I’d like to consider some of the ways in which work on Irish has, it seems to me, added to, or deepened, or at least complicated in a healthy way, our understanding of some more general issues.

Let me start, though, with what this language is and what its situation is.

Irish and its Situation

The first thing to say is that, even though I characterized Irish (by implication) as a classic endangered language a few moments ago, its situation is in fact far from typical.

Irish is in law the *first official language* of the Republic of Ireland. That means that Irish is the national language of a prosperous first-world capitalist democracy. English is recognized as the *second official language* of the country. As critics of national language policies continually point out, though, these constitutional claims reflect wishful thinking or hypocrisy rather than reality. For almost every purpose, Ireland is an English-speaking country and for the vast majority of the population, Irish plays no role whatever in day to day routines.

For all that, the language has real importance as a cultural and political symbol, and as a consequence it enjoys most of the trappings and conveniences that one would expect of a national language—a TV channel, a radio network, a large published literature, newspapers, a large presence in the educational system, and numbers of civil servants who are charged with the tasks of coining official neologisms, managing spelling reforms, producing reference grammars and dictionaries, and so on.

At the same time, Irish is an endangered language spoken as a vernacular by an embattled and marginalized community whose cultural and economic survival is very much open to doubt. Since the foundation of the state in 1922, it has been official policy to maintain the language in those communities in which it has historically been the vernacular (the *Gaeltachtaí*) These efforts have not been successful. Estimates of the number of native speakers who live in these communities today range from a low of 15,000 to a high of 30,000.

The question of whether or not a given community is to be considered a *Gaeltacht* is furthermore fraught—a source of considerable internal conflict. And the questions to be answered by those communities are those that must be faced by many such communities across the globe. What will be the language of instruction in our schools? What will be the language of religious observance? How much pressure should we bring to bear on our young people to make sure that they learn ‘our’ language? Is it legitimate to apply such pressure, and do we do harm to our children in applying it?

As a consequence of such all too familiar pressures, many local varieties of the language have disappeared since 1922.

There is one way, however, in which policies and ideals of language promotion in Ireland have had real and unusual effect. They have resulted in the creation of a second community of Irish speakers—people who do not have native ability, but who have achieved high levels of second-language competence and who use Irish regularly in their daily routines. This is, in the main, an educated, urban, middle class, and very dispersed community. There are perhaps 100,000 people who use the language regularly in this way, the vast majority of whom have some sentimental or ideological commitment to the language and its survival. Many use Irish in the home and send their children to Irish-medium play-groups and Irish-medium schools.

As a consequence, there is now a substantial number of children who have been learning a newly calqued urban version of Irish as a first language. The levelling and creolization processes which then take place in the Irish-medium schools give birth to varieties which are a complicated mix of Irish and English elements, a mix which varies considerably from place to place (very different, for instance, in Dublin and in Belfast), and which also varies considerably with the formality or informality of the linguistic setting.

It would be wrong to overstate the split between these two communities; there are of course all sorts of interactions and commonalities which bind the two together. Nevertheless, the fundamental division is real enough and it gives rise to its own tensions.

One consequence of this set of circumstances which is particularly relevant for the pursuit of linguistic research is that Irish is a language which is in the odd situation that the vast majority of its users are L2 speakers rather than native speakers in the usual sense.¹

The Research Context

In this charged and complicated setting, the business of doing linguistic work can be fraught. Which kind of Irish and whose kind of Irish do we privilege for investigation and codification?

To this question, different answers are surely appropriate, depending on one's goals and interests. My own view is that the goal of describing the Irish of *Gaeltacht* communities is a reasonable one for a linguistics which is theoretical in the sense of generative grammar (one whose principal goal is that of describing what it means to have full native control of a grammatical system), and my aim has been (and will continue to be) to shed light on questions of linguistic theory by investigating the range of varieties used in *Gaeltacht* communities.

The study of the modern urban varieties is methodologically too fraught, it seems to me, if the principal aim of the enterprise is to clarify what it means to have full native ability in a language. What is needed for understanding the emergence and structure of these new varieties are the skills of the creolist, the investigator of L2 acquisition, of partial or imperfect learning and so on.

This is the right conclusion in scientific terms, but it is not hard to see how it can be misconstrued (if that is the right way of putting it) as exclusionary and élitist.

¹One consequence is that it is difficult or impossible to use certain tools for linguistic research—web searches for example. There is lots of web-content in Irish, but the vast majority of it has been created by L2 speakers of varying levels of ability.

And once that decision is made (the decision to concentrate on *Gaeltacht* varieties), we are now in the unhappy country of the endangered language.

Irish now exists as a continuum of three major dialects (crudely: Northern, Western, and Southern). These varieties are different enough one from another to make for substantial difficulties in mutual comprehension. All three major dialects have speakers in every age-cohort. Unsurprisingly, though, levels of ability vary enormously from place to place, from generation to generation, and from individual to individual. Among those who are in their teens at present, for instance, one finds the full range of levels of competence—from purely passive ability, through many grades of semi-speaker ability, through to rich and fully-featured competence. Linguistic change is rapid, and there is some evidence, anecdotal but persuasive, that the youngest generation of all (those younger than 10) have begun in the past 5 years or so to decisively throw off the language.

Working with native speaker consultants in this context can be difficult. There is no shortage of consultants and most of the people that I have worked with are younger than I am. However, many speakers, younger people especially, feel that their own competence is limited or degraded by comparison with that of older and ‘better’ speakers—an attitude which can lead to undue deference towards an investigator, or to a profound unease with the task of offering judgments of well-formedness or unacceptability. Often, the investigator is referred to local authority figures who are felt to be repositories of the true and rich local form of the language. But working with these very self-conscious bearers of linguistic tradition is tricky in different ways, since they are often concerned with the preservation and presentation of ‘pure’ and historically correct local features, and will as a consequence often deny the validity of patterns which do not conform to this ideal.

These kinds of difficulties are well known to field linguists everywhere, but for the linguist working on *Gaeltacht* Irish, there is a range of compensating resources which derive fairly directly from the official national veneration in which the language has been held.

- There is a large published literature.
- There radio and tv broadcasts which are easily accessible.
- There is a rich descriptive tradition, which in recent times especially has drawn more on more on recent advances in theoretical linguistics.

The resources just described are all the more important in that in doing linguistic research on Irish, we lack the single most important resource we can have—namely, a community of native-speaker linguists, whose expertise can provide a check against false or incomplete claims about data. With respect to languages like

Japanese or Hebrew, these communities have the vital function of running and re-running crucial experiments (judgments of grammaticality, judgments of synonymy, judgments about entailments and implicatures and ambiguity) again and again, refining and revising factual claims in a cumulative process over years. These are our replicated experiments.

In the case of Irish, however, there is no such community and no such protection.

The absence of a community of native speaker linguists makes the investigation of certain kinds of question very difficult indeed, if not altogether impossible. Consider one topical issue—how reconstruction effects should be understood. The delicate experiments that one finds, for instance, in Danny Fox's work—attempting to establish if judgments about anaphoric possibilities correlate with judgments about relative scope under reconstruction—cannot realistically be run for Irish. The community (native speakers and linguists) that would collectively assess and sift claims about such subtle effects simply does not exist.

Work must also proceed more slowly than for the languages whose investigation has most shaped the practices and methodology of generative grammar. Questions of fact that can be settled in a matter of minutes for a language such as German or French require much more effort and time (weeks and months rather than minutes) for their resolution in Irish. There are fewer people to ask the questions, there are fewer people to provide the answers, and those who can provide the answers are not usually in the office next door.

More serious than the issue of speed are the issues of quantity and quality of evidence. If we take it that the elicitation of a native speaker judgment is the standard replicable experiment in (this kind of) linguistics, then for Irish, many many fewer experiments have been run than have been run for, say, German or Japanese.

None of these circumstances seems likely to change. For reasons that I would like to understand better (but which I suspect have mostly to do with broader societal attitudes towards the language), students of linguistics in Ireland are not drawn to work on Irish. Most choose to work on the major European languages. And for an outside investigator (a graduate student in a doctoral program in North America, say) who ventures in, there are major challenges to overcome.

Working on Irish, then, while not as challenging as working on many endangered languages, brings with it a particular and idiosyncratic set of difficulties. Recognizing those challenges raises issues which are very important but which have been very little discussed, in public or formal settings at least. Imagine that some important theoretical proposal emerges from analytical work on a language in roughly the state that Irish is in. Will or should this proposal be given the same weight in shaping general theory as proposals emerging, say, from the study of Italian? Rationality and common sense say no. It is simply a fact that analyses of Irish have not

been tested and scrutinized in the way that analyses of Italian or Japanese or Hebrew or English have been. And this is not really a temporary stage in the development of a subfield. There is not likely ever to be a set of circumstances in which Irish ‘catches up’ in the relevant sense.

But such rational caution brings its own risks. Many more languages are beset by the kinds of difficulties described here for Irish than are free of them. And of the great number of languages whose grip on the world is tenuous, few provide the kinds of counter-balancing resources that are available to the linguist working on Irish. In being cautious about the assessment of evidence, then, we run the risk of excluding, or under-valuing, whatever insights might be gleaned from all of those languages which have had the bad luck to run afoul of one imperial administration or another.

All of this is in some sense inevitable, and clearly there are no absolute principles that one can appeal to in deciding what to be persuaded of and what to be sceptical about. People will assess the available evidence as best they can. In assessing evidence from Irish, however, analysts need to be aware of what the circumstances are in which this work was done.

And any general exclusion would, it seems to me, be short-sighted. For, in spite of all the hazards and idiosyncrasies, real progress has been made in the linguistics of Irish in recent years, and the sense has been palpable, especially since the early 1990s, of things falling into place, often in surprising and unexpected ways.

In the second half of this talk, I would like to focus on one of the areas in which such progress has been made, trying to focus on the larger lessons learned rather than on the shifting details of implementation.

Clause Structure

Perhaps the single most celebrated property of Irish is the fact that it is a so-called vso language. That is, in a simple finite clause such as those seen in (1):

- (1) a. Chonaic na gasraí capall mór bán ansin inné
 saw the boys horse big white there yesterday
 ‘The boys saw a great white horse there yesterday.’
 b. Bhéarfaidh mé an t-airgead do Chaoimhín i nDoire inniu
 give [FUT] I the money to Kevin in Derry today
 ‘I’ll give Kevin the money in Derry today.’
 c. Sciob an cat an t-eireaball den luch.
 cut the cat the tail off-the mouse
 ‘The cat cut the tail off the mouse.’

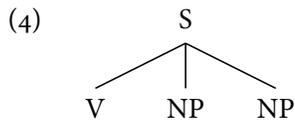
the order of the core elements is as laid out in the formula in (2):

- (2) Verb < Subject < Object < Oblique Arguments < Adverbials

The inflected verb comes first; the subject, if there is one, comes second; the object, if there is one, comes next, followed by more peripheral material like oblique arguments, adverbial elements and so on (Irish has no double object construction). In fact, Irish is a particularly strict vso language in that, unlike many other vso languages, it does not tolerate svo order as an alternative in finite clauses. The examples in (3) are just like those in (2), except in that the subject has been placed to the left of the inflected verb. They are profoundly ungrammatical:

- (3) a. *Na gasraí chonaic capall mór bán ansin inné.
 the boys saw horse big white there yesterday
 ‘The boys saw a great white horse there yesterday.’
 b. *Mé bhéarfaidh an t-airgead do Chaoimhín i nDoire inniu.
 c. *An cat sciob an t-eireaball den luch.

The earliest discussions of Irish syntax in modern theoretical contexts (my own 1979 book, for instance, or Nancy Stenson’s 1981 book) took these facts at face-value, and assumed a three-way branching structure for transitive clauses, like that shown in (4):



This account, such as it was, had the appeal of avoiding a certain kind of analytical complexity and abstraction—of which a person might be suspicious. It also had the appeal of making the language seem ‘special’ in just the way that in fact it seemed to be special. This was rhetorically comforting at the time that these proposals emerged since one of the criticisms that generative syntax then faced constantly from those working in more traditional modes of analysis was the charge that it forced all languages into a single analytical strait-jacket for the sake of a pre-established theoretical conformity, and that it thus paid insufficient attention to the unique and idiosyncratic internal spirit of individual languages.

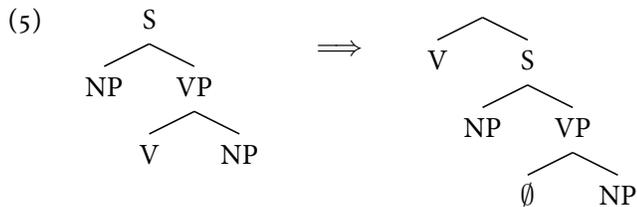
The proposal had, in addition, the interesting theoretical property (closely related to the last observation) that it presupposed that there were deep differences in syntactic organization between Irish and other languages which were at the time much better investigated than Irish was—svo languages such as the major European languages, for instance. In particular, subject and direct object could not be

distinguished structurally in the way that had become familiar since Chomsky's *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, and notions like *c*-command could be of only dubious relevance to syntax since, given the structure in (4), the standard definitions did not render the subject more prominent than the object in any sense. To the extent that subjects and objects were different in their syntactic behavior, then, those differences could not be attributed to phrase structural properties such as command.

In this, discussions of the syntax of vso languages or clauses formed part of a much larger debate about whether or not there exist *non-configurational languages* (Ken Hale's term)—languages which did not make use of articulated phrase structural configurations to draw core grammatical distinctions.

The first people to show that vso languages of this type were not exotic in the way that one would expect given (4) were Steve Anderson and Sandy Chung. In their 1977 article on the syntax of Breton, they showed that Breton was not at all exotic in the way that one might expect given (4). In fact, numerous grammatical processes in the language, they showed, distinguished subjects from objects in routine and familiar ways. Their own conclusion was that the relevant distinctions were not to be made in phrase structural terms, but rather by way of direct appeal to relational primitives such as SUBJECT (the first grammatical relation) or OBJECT (the second grammatical relation).

Joe Emonds then showed in a farseeing paper published in 1980 how the basic facts of vso structure could be accommodated within a standard articulated clause-structure. That is one could assume an initial structure like (5) and turn it in to a verb-initial structure by way of a verb-fronting operation:



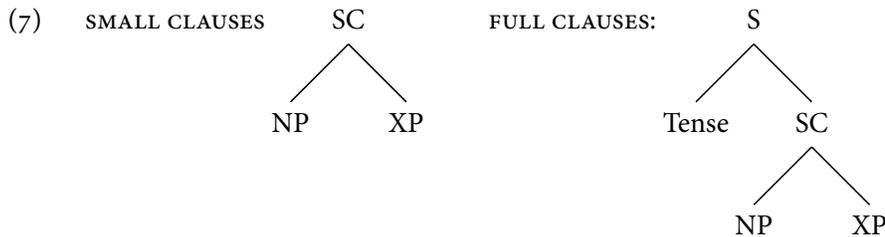
Emonds' paper, remarkably, was entirely programmatic—it analyzed hardly any actual language data. Meanwhile, in a 1983 paper, I had shown that Irish did in fact possess what looked like perfectly routine VP's—unexpected given the flat structure of (4). Such phrases turn up in the periphrastic progressive construction, as seen for instance, in a clefted example such as (6):

- (6) Ag magadh orm a bheadh siad.
 mock [PROG] on-me c be [COND] they
 'It's mocking me that they'd be.'

in which the VP, or VP-like constituent *mocking me* has undergone fronting. It was Richard Sproat who in 1985 first put all of these pieces together to produce something like the widely-accepted current analysis for this kind of vso language, in a proposal about Welsh. And Sandy Chung and I in 1987 showed how this kind of proposal could provide an understanding of a broad array of facts and patterns internal to Irish.

The 1987 Chung-McCloskey Proposal

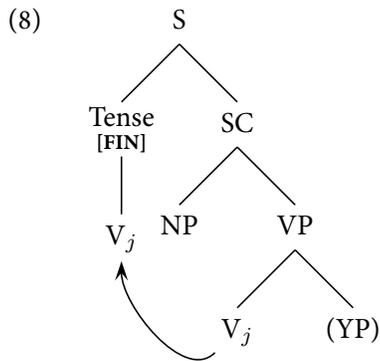
And it's that analysis (the Chung-McCloskey proposal from 1987) that I'd like to take as my starting-point here. For a variety of reasons that I won't go in to here, we were very concerned with the relation between small clauses (tenseless predicational nexuses) and full clauses in the languages. The effort to understand that relation led us to propose the two schematic analyses in (7):



That is, each clause has a predicational nexus at its core and what we call a clause is the result of the combination of that core with a specification of Tense. From that starting point, a variety of possible surface outcomes are possible:

- When XP is not VP, what emerges is a non-verbal predicational structure (a 'copular clause') with the 'copula' a realization of the Tense element.
- When XP is VP and Tense is finite, v and Tense amalgamate in the position of Tense (giving vso order).
- When XP is VP and Tense is nonfinite, no such amalgamation takes place, and what emerges is a subject-initial order.

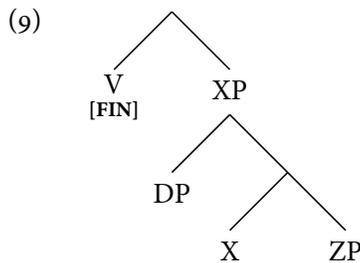
Among these, the one that is of principal concern to us here is the second, which provides for finite clauses the analysis in (8):



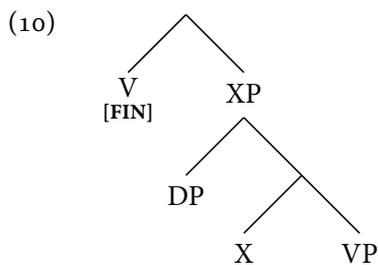
Here it is the verb fronting operation which creates the marvellously strange and peculiar objects which we so casually call *finite verbs*.

Now Sandy and I were as pleased as anything with this analysis, and it does indeed do a lot of useful work internal to the language. But of course anyone looking at it from a perspective which cares about a half way reasonable theory of phrase structure will find it laughable.

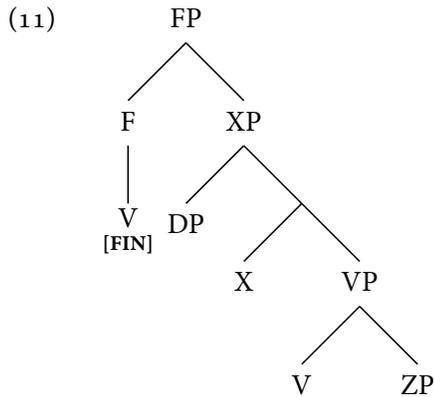
In fact, given reasonable expectations about how phrase structure works, (8) will be filled out as in (9), with a well-behaved specifier-head-complement skeleton.



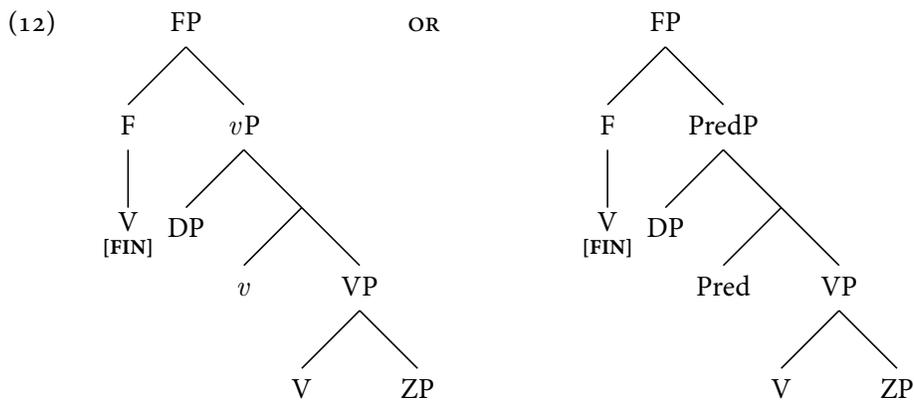
And if our intuition (and John Bowers' intuition in an important series of papers) is on the right track—namely that at the heart of every clause there is a small clause), we will actually want (10), where x is whatever head determines the bare predicational structures that we call 'small clauses':



If *v* does not originate in initial position, then (10) will in fact be more like (11):



in which *F* is some closed-class category whose content is ultimately realized as part of the inflected verb. This structure in turn we can interpret, in suitably modern fashion as in (12):



And with this series of small modernizations, we are close to modern conceptions—the verb itself introducing internal arguments, a distinguished closed class category of which *vP* is the complement introducing the subject argument, that whole structure in turn contained within a series of closed-class categories implicated in verbal inflection.

Now it should be stressed that there is one important way in which (12) is simplified—in assuming that the subject always remains within the verbal projection. We now know that this is incorrect; what is true however is that the subject always remains to the right of, and below the position of the inflected verb. This issue is not essential to the purposes of the present talk and so I set it aside.

That said, certain important research questions open out:

- What is the category $F(P)$?
- In what way does Irish differ from other languages such that vso order emerges as the order of its finite clauses? Does the subject systematically remain lower than in svo languages? Does the verb systematically raise higher than in svo languages?
- What is the status of the specifier position of FP? Is it always empty? Is it occupied by a null element?
- Is F the only projection above the verbal space?

These are all important questions, which are the focus of much current work, but I do not want to address them here. Instead, I would like to ask a different set of questions. I would like to stand back a little from the short-lived froth of current debate and ask if we are sure that all of this represents any kind of progress, any kind of deepening of understanding.

For at just this point the sceptic (of which there are many) might well charge that all we are doing is playing out the moves of a predictable and self-validating game. We believe that grammatical relations are structurally determined so we say what we have to say to make that work out. We believe that prominence relations are structurally defined, so we say what we need to say to make that work out as well. At no point, it might be argued, have we managed to escape from the loop of our own assumptions.

I'm not sure that it is possible to answer such scepticism fully, but I would like to go at least part of the way. I believe that the analyses sketched here do in fact represent a genuine deepening of understanding, and I want to try to say why that might be a reasonable thing to believe. To do that, it will be useful to turn to some of the more unexpected consequences of the analysis schematized in (12), and to reflect on some of the ways in which it seems to run counter to intuition.

In fact, at least the following questions and worries arise with respect to the analysis in (12).

It is a fundamental claim of (12) that all of the material following the inflected verb in a finite clause jointly constitutes a syntactic constituent. To the ear of the native speaker, there seems to be something unintuitive about this conclusion.

A second implication of (12) is that a single word—the inflected verb—is distributed across at least three syntactic positions even in the simplest clause. The simple past tense verb *chonaic* of (1)a corresponds to three distinct syntactic positions, all of which it in some sense occupies. This can seem either paradoxical or wrong, especially to those committed to some version of the Lexicalist Hypothesis.

In what remains of this paper, I would like to try to argue:

1. That the claim of constituency, while counter-intuitive, is in fact correct,
2. That in addition we can understand why the claim seems counter-intuitive, and thirdly
3. That the claim that the inflected verb is syntactically complex and distributed is also in fact correct.

The Constituency Claim

As a matter of fact, there is a whole range of constituency tests which indicate that the fundamental claim of (12) (that everything following a finite verb forms a constituent) is in fact correct. Let's consider that evidence.

Right Node Raising

It is, for instance, routinely possible to apply Right Node Raising to the sequence of elements following the finite verb. This is illustrated for a variety of different clause-types in the attested examples presented in (14). It is probably asking too much of you to expect you to be able to parse such complex structures in an unfamiliar language on the fly. But it will perhaps help if you concentrate on seeing the structure in (13), which is common to all of the examples:

(13) ... (C) (Neg) V Conj V [Subject ...]

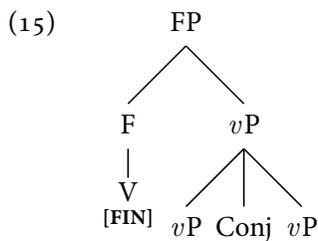
The examples are chosen so as to eliminate the possibility that they involve simple conjunction of verbs.

- (14) a. Is é mo thuairim ná fuil, nó gur beag má tá, aon
 COP[PRES] it my opinion NEG C is or C-[PAST] little if is any
 bochtán sa pharóiste ná fuil roinnt dá chuid aige
 pauper in-the parish NEG C is portion of-his possessions at-him
 'It is my opinion that there is not, or that there is hardly, a single pauper
 in the parish who does not have a portion of his wealth' S 111
- b. Is annamh a bhí, má bhí ariamh, bean amuigh ag an
 COP[PRES] seldom c was if was ever woman out at the
 rialtas ar na hócáidí sin
 government on those occasions
 'Only rarely, if ever, did the government put forward any women candi-
 dates on these occasions' CF 64

- c. Ba chóir go ndéanfadh, agus dhéanfadh, pairlimint náisiúnta
 COP[PAST] proper C would-do and would-do parliament national
 Éireannach dlíthe a rith nár ...
 Irish laws enact [-FIN] NEG C
 'A national Irish parliament should, and would, enact laws that ... ODR2
 297

Coordination

What patterns of coordination might we expect if the structure in (12) was correct? Among others, we would expect the pattern in (15), with coordination of the sister of the functional head to which the verb raises.



in which case we would expect across the board raising of the verbal complex to F. The ultimate outcome should be a finite verb followed by a coordination of two distinct constituents, each of which contains a distinct subject, but in which the initial verb is shared by both conjuncts. That is, we expect examples like (16), which are indeed very widely and freely attested:

- (16) Thug Peats dhá leathchoróin dom agus Geraldeen leathchoróin dom.
 gave two half-crown to-me and half-crown to-me
 'Pats gave me two half-crowns and Geraldeen gave me a half-crown.' ABFS
 23

Of particular interest are the kinds of examples exemplified by (17). In these cases we have disjunction under negation, and there is no way to understand such examples in terms of gapping.

- (17) a. nuair nach dtáinig siad ar ais ná scéala ar bith uathu
 when NEG C came they back or news any from-them
 'When they did not come back and no news of them came back.' LAOCHAS
 134
- b. Níor thug an t-Údarás aon chabhair dúinn, nó an
 NEG-[PAST] gave the Authority any help to-us or the

Chomhairle Chontae aon tacaíocht dúinn.

County Council any support to-us

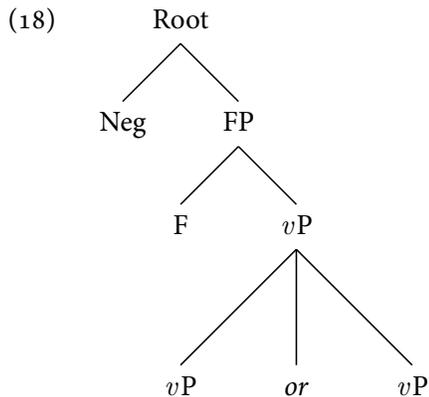
‘The Authority didn’t give us any help and the County Council didn’t give us any support.’ RNG 23-2-05

c. Ní titfimid leo nó iad linn

NEG fall [FUT] [P₁] to-them or them to-us

‘We will not fall to them nor they to us.’ BOM 40

The structure involved here has to be (18), in which the disjunct particle *or* falls under the scope of negation, but in which there is across the board raising (and therefore sharing) of the verb to the F-position.



These examples have the particular interest for our purposes that they cannot derive from disjointed clauses with deletion of the verb in the second clause. Such structures would yield entirely the wrong meanings. In the case of (18c), for example, the interpretation would be:

(19) We will not fall to them or they will not fall to us.

But this not what (17c) means. Crucial for its interpretation is the structure in (18), in which we have a disjunction in the scope of negation (equivalent to a conjunction of negations). This is exactly what is expected given (18), and it follows in turn that the disjunction must be at a level below the position in which the (shared) verb appears, suggesting in its turn that the constituency suggested by (12) is correct.

Focus Constructions

Focus constructions reveal the same constituency break. In the interests of time, I will not linger over the details here, but the basic point is again simple and clear.

The sequence of elements following the finite verb can act as the focus in a variety of constructions, suggesting again that the constituency of (12) is real.

The Semi-negative Construction

The semi-negative construction is illustrated in (20). It is reminiscent of the *ne ... que* construction in French or the *not ... but* construction in nonstandard varieties of English.

- (20) a. Cha raibh ach ceithre phingin agam.
 NEG was but four penny at-me
 'I had only fourpence.'
- b. Níor chuala mé go fóill acht na ballaí ag magadh orm.
 NEG-[PAST] heard I yet but the walls mock [PROG] on-me
 'All I heard yet was the walls mocking me.' UMI 37

In this construction the particle *ach* ('but') attaches to some constituent within the scope of negation, and the ultimate effect is that of *only* focussing on that constituent, as in nonstandard English *I ain't got but four cents*. This is useful for us here because it is one of the best established and most reliable tests of constituency that the language makes available. It is noteworthy, then, that this test too identifies the post-verbal sequence as a constituent, as shown in (21):

- (21) a. Ní raibh ach na ceistanna freagartha agam, nuair a ...
 NEG be [PAST] but the questions answered by-me when C
 'No sooner had I answered the questions, when ... ACS 167
- b. Ní raibh ach mo chloigeann sa doras agam nuair a ...
 NEG be [PAST] but my head in-the door at-me when C
 'I had only just put my head in the door when ... STL 245
- c. garda óg ná raibh ach an Teampall Mór fágtha aige
 policeman young NEG C was but Templemore left by-him
 'a young policeman who had only just left Templemore' AGMTS202

Pseudoclefts

Finally, the pseudocleft test (another very reliable test for constituency) identifies the postverbal sequence as a constituent, as shown in the examples of (23), all of which have the schematic structure in (22):

- (22) [*What was* [*but* [Subject ...]]]

with the focus particle attaching to a constituent which consists of everything which follows the finite verb of the clause.

- (23) a. *cad a bhí ach Coláiste úr Gaeilge i ndiaidh a fhoscladh i gCathair Nua Eabhraigh New York*
 what c was but College new Irish after open [-FIN] in City
 ‘What should it be but a new Irish College to have just opened in New York City.’ CDC 63
- b. *Cad a bhí ach an bia roinnte aici agus an bainne tabhartha dos na boicht aici the poor by-her*
 what c was but the food divided by-her and the milk given to
 ‘What should it be but that she had distributed the food and given the milk to the poor’ GOG 279

This material has surely been difficult to parse and difficult to follow in detail, since the illustrative structures are necessarily so complex. For all that, the basic point should, I hope, be fairly clear. By whatever way we know to detect the presence of a syntactic constituent in this language, the sequence of elements following the finite verb tests as a constituent. That is the constituency of a vso clause in Irish is as indicated in (24), with a major constituency break following the inflected verb:

- (24) [Verb Subject Object Oblique]

and one of the core predictions of (12) is borne out.

I want to turn now to a final phenomenon which leads to the same conclusion. I have left this one to last partly because it should be easier to grasp, partly because it contains within itself the seeds of a further puzzle—one which should move us towards resolution of some of the larger questions raised but left unresolved in the earlier discussion.

Ellipsis

The construction in question is one of the core ellipsis constructions of the language. Consider the characteristic examples in (25):

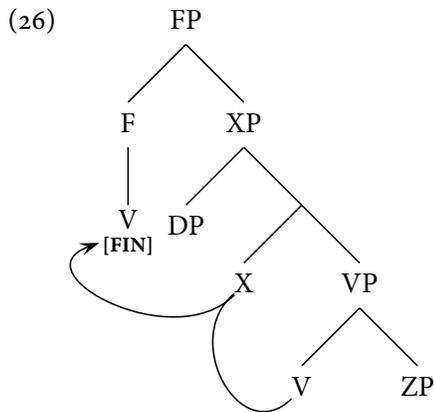
- (25) a. *Dúirt siad go dtiocfadh siad, ach ní tháinig ariamh.*
 say [PAST] they c come [COND] they but NEG come [PAST] ever
 ‘They said that they would come but they never did.’

- b. Beidh muid connáilte, nach mbeidh?
 be [FUT] we frozen NEG INTERR C be [FUT]
 ‘We’ll be frozen, won’t we?’

This process has been much studied (see especially McCloskey 1991 and Lotus Goldberg’s doctoral thesis written at McGill a few years ago). The properties of this ellipsis process are as follows:

- There must be a linguistic antecedent for the elided material, to the same extent and in the same way that VP ellipsis in English is subject to such a requirement.
- It shows the same range of characteristic functions as VP ellipsis in English (it is used in answers to Yes/No questions, in Tag Questions, in coordinations, and so on).
- It may apply ‘backwards’ as long as the elided constituent does not command the antecedent constituent
- It gives rise to strict/sloppy ambiguities and to the ‘eliminative puzzles’ much studied in the literature on VP ellipsis.
- It supports antecedent contained ellipsis.

I will not demonstrate all of these properties here, but rather refer you to the literature already cited. What is important for our purposes here is that this construction provides another piece of evidence in support of (12) and the empirical generalization it derives—namely (24). The standard analysis of this construction (and the only viable one as far as I know) is that it involves elision of the complement of the head to which the verb raises in a finite clause, as illustrated in (26):



Here F , as before, is one of the closed-class items which jointly define ‘the inflectional layer’ (the syntactic repository of information about mood, tense, polarity, and aspect), and (25a,b) arise by way of elimination of xP —the complement of the head to which the finite verb raises. The verb itself, having raised out of the ellipsis site survives.

We will return shortly to certain other puzzles having to do with this ellipsis (the subsidiary puzzles hinted at earlier), but before doing that, it might be wise to take stock.

Taking Stock

We have now seen ample evidence for the claims made by (12) and particularly for the empirical generalization that it derives—namely (24). Despite the clear and strong evidence for these conclusions, we are left with at least two worries, it seems to me.

The first such worry is this: If the evidence for (24) is so strong, why does it strike speakers of the language as so wildly counter-intuitive? This is an important meta-puzzle.

And then there is another worry. The analysis depends on the assumption of a certain mis-match between syntax and morphophonology: the pieces which make up the verb are on this analysis scattered across three different positions in syntactic space. Now of course, for some, the usefulness of head-movement was long ago established and the appeal to head movement (or something like it) upon which the analysis in (12) rests will bring no new worries. But the issue is a serious and important one, and hardly settled, so we should not, it seems to me, take the matter lightly.

I’d like to end by trying to say something about each of these worries and by suggesting that both can be resolved in interesting ways.

Resolution of the First Worry

Consider again (27), one of our earlier examples of a simple transitive finite clause.

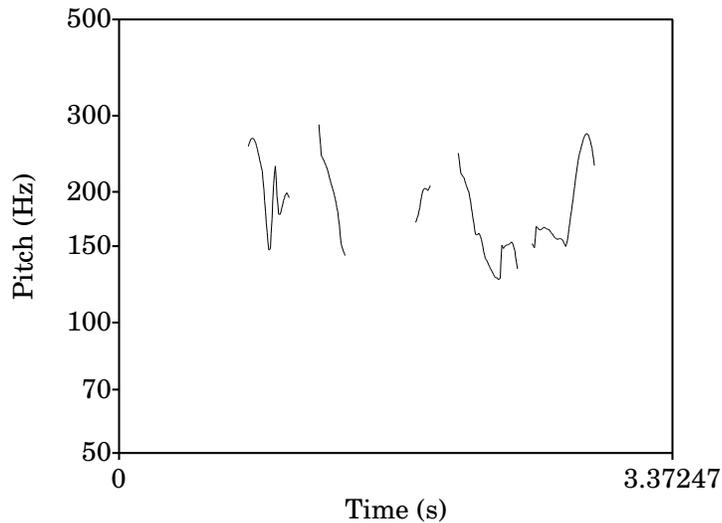
- (27) Sciob an cat an t-eireaball den luch.
 cut the cat the tail off-the mouse
 ‘The cat cut the tail off the mouse.’

We have talked a lot about its syntax, but what about its phonology?

Well, given certain very well-established views about how prosodic phrasing is derived from syntactic structures (due largely to the work of Lisa Selkirk), we will expect that in a structure such as (27), there will in fact be, a fairly dramatic misalignment between the syntactic phrasing and the phonological phrasing. If phonological phrasing, for example, is determined by a search for the first right edge of a maximal projection (as widely assumed), then the first phonological phrase constructed in the case of (27) will include the verb and the subject, but it will exclude everything else. That is, the prosodic phrasing of (27) will be expected to be as in (28):

(28) (Sciob an cat)_φ (an t-eireaball den luch)_φ

This expectation is in fact exactly right. The example in (27) is a real one, for which we have an audio recording. It is in fact available at <http://ohlone.ucsc.edu/Bab/luch.wav>. And below is a pitch track analysis of an utterance of this sentence (by a famous storyteller from County Kerry).



(Sound-file extracted from *Ó Bhéal an Bhab, Cnuas-scéalta Bhab Feiritéar*, Cló Iarr-Chonnachta, 2002, CD 1, track 3 ('An Luch a Bhí Déanach don Aifreann').

Notice that the end of the first phrase (the sequence of verb plus subject) is marked off by a significant pause, as well as by a striking drop in pitch.

I want to claim that it is this misalignment of syntactic and phonological phrasing that makes the analysis in (12) seem so strange. To the extent that speakers have raw intuitions about constituency, I suspect that those intuitions are grounded in phonological and prosodic facts.

Whatever about that, what is clear is that the proposal in (12) lets us understand both the syntactic facts and the facts of phonological phrasing.

The Second Worry

What might reassure us, though, about the second worry, which also concerns a mismatch—a mismatch in this case between the syntax and the morphophonology? To resolve this, I want to return to the ellipsis process discussed earlier, and consider some puzzles that arise when we try to understand more closely the conditions under which it can apply.

Verbal Identity and its Limits

Traditional grammars always describe this construction (the *responsive form*) via an instruction to ‘repeat the verb of the earlier sentence’. And that injunction captures an important truth about this ellipsis process. It is a fact that the verb of the elided constituent, and the verb of the antecedent constituent must be identical. So (29) is entirely impossible.

- (29) *Níor cheannaigh siad ariamh teach ach dhíol.
 NEG[PAST] bought they ever house but sold
 ‘They never bought a house but they sold (a house).’

When one probes a little more closely, though, one finds that the requirement of identity is inexact in an interesting way. The verb of the antecedent and the verb at the ellipsis site must in some sense be the ‘same verb’; however they need not match in tense, finiteness, mood, or agreement morphology, as shown in (30).

- (30) a. Níor cheannaigh mé ariamh teach ach cheannóinn.
 NEG[PAST] bought I ever house but buy [COND] [S₁]
 ‘I never bought a house, but I would.’
 b. Mhol siad domh teach a cheannach agus cheannaigh sa
 advised they to-me house buy [-FIN] and bought in-the
 deireadh.
 end
 ‘They advised me to buy a house and I did in the end.’
 c. Gabh isteach ar ais. Ní rachaidh.
 go [IMPV] in back NEG go [FUT]
 ‘Go back in. I won’t.’

To be more exact, the split between which features count or do not count for establishing identity (and therefore deletability) is exactly the split between what features are expressed syntactically in the inflectional layer and what features are expressed syntactically in the *v-v* combination (i.e. in the root). Irrelevant are features of tense, modality, aspect, finiteness, and agreement. What is required, rather, is that the two roots be identical. Specifically:

The *v-v* amalgam heading the ellided constituent must be identical to the *v-v* amalgam heading the antecedent constituent.

This pattern of facts makes sense, as far as I can see, only under two assumptions:

The first is that the mechanism which assesses identity (and therefore deletability) must see a verb in the elision-site (i.e. not in the position where it is pronounced). If there were no verbal element in the ellipsis site, it is hard to see why its identity should matter in the calculation of *given-ness*, or *identity*, or whatever relationship it is that licenses ellipsis.

The second assumption is that the mechanism which assesses identity (and therefore deletability) must not see the specification of Tense, Mood, Aspect, and Agreement inside the ellipsis site. This information must, rather, be external to the ellipsis site, and therefore correctly judged to be irrelevant in the calculation of identity.

Put another way, the two assumptions that we need to understand these ellipsis patterns are exactly the two assumptions that are built in to the analysis schematized as (12).

This is a compelling kind of confirmation, it seems to me, for the general view encapsulated there and a useful reassurance that we are not mad in being driven to these kinds of conclusions.

The distribution of the verbal pieces (root versus inflectional morphology) across distinct syntactic positions which is a key part of (12) provides a way of understanding both the puzzle of the verbal identity requirement and the puzzle of its limits. Things could hardly have been otherwise, given the assumptions of (12).

Final Thoughts

We began by asking if we could provide some reasons for believing in the kind of analysis of vso structures outlined earlier, that broke out of, or away from, the very assumptions that make that debate worth having. I think it's reasonable to claim some success in that.

More important, though, is the bigger conclusion that Irish turns out to be much less exotic than it seemed 25 or 30 years ago. It turns out, in fact, to be very different

from what would have been expected given the 'flat' structure assumed in earlier work. It turns out, in fact, to have just the kind of finely articulated phrase structure often assumed for svo languages.

It can feel a little disappointing sometimes to have the language that you are intrigued by and committed to come out as pedestrian. But that, of course, is what progress is going to feel like a lot of the time, as facts slip into place in larger theoretical structures. And it is one of the central Chomskyan themes that the deeper we dig under the skin of particular languages, the more we will find commonality and similarity, rather than diversity and difference.

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