Modern Irish Verbal Endings as Pronouns

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There is a certain analytical tension between agreement and pronominal incorporation: when is it correct to analyse a particular syntactic phenomenon as agreement rather than incorporation, and vice versa? An interesting illustration of this tension is provided by verbal forms in Modern Irish, which show a curious morphosyntactic complementarity: if there is no overt subject, a synthetic form of the verb is used, showing inflection for person and number (1a); but if there is an overt subject, the form of the verb used is analytic, showing no agreement (1b). This distribution is mandatory: analytic verbs require an overt subject, and, strikingly, overt subjects are ungrammatical with synthetic verb forms (1c). Moreover, if a synthetic form exists, under most circumstances it *must* be used (1d). Similar facts obtain with prepositions (2).

Since McCloskey and Hale (1984), the standard analysis for these data has been that Irish makes extensive use of agreement with null *pro* (cf. e.g. Legate 1999, *inter alia*). Such accounts are able to account for the grammatical examples easily, but have difficulty explaining why overt subjects should be in complementary distribution with synthetic verb forms. A less-accepted competing theory (cf. e.g. Doron 1988) attempts to account for the distribution by syntactic movement of subject pronouns, followed by incorporation of the pronoun into the verbal complex. Movement analyses readily account for the complementary distribution of endings and pronouns, since under these theories, endings and pronouns are the same thing, but they must postulate exceptional movement in order to do so. It has also been argued that such accounts cannot be generalised as widely as agreement accounts can be; however, as I will argue below, this is not so much of a problem as it appears.

In this paper I argue that Irish person-number morphemes are neither agreement morphemes nor syntactically incorporated pronouns, but rather reflect affixation under adjacency (Local Dislocation, in Distributed Morphology parlance; cf. e.g. Embick 2007) at PF. The advantage of this analysis is that Local Dislocation operates when two nodes are linearly adjacent, regardless of their syntactic structure, because it applies *after* the hierarchical structure of the sentence has been computed and syntactic movements have taken place. When the syntactic derivation is complete, the resulting hierarchical structure is converted to a linear sequence at PF, and its terminal elements are concatenated with respect to each other, both at the word level and beneath it. Local Dislocation applies at this stage when certain requirements of subject φ-features and tense are met, and the pronominal, previously an independent form (M-word), is concatenated to the verb to its left and becomes an affix (Subword).

Under this analysis, Irish verbal endings are not the usual agreement morphemes, but bona fide subject pronouns. Though this is an unusual phenomenon, particularly for an Indo-European language, it actually accords well with two other unexpected constructions in Irish. First, verbal and prepositional inflection are allowed to serve as antecedents for relative clauses (3). This is unexpected on an agreement account, since neither agreement morphemes nor null elements are typical antecedents (in languages like Italian, subject *pro* cannot antecede a relative clause), but it makes sense if the apparent inflections are actually pronouns. Second, Irish allows the apparent conjunction of null subjects with full DPs, in which case the verb seems to agree with the null left conjunct (4a). If the order of conjuncts is reversed, only the non-agreeing analytic verb may be used and *pro* is ungrammatical (4b-c). These locality requirements are difficult to explain under an agreement analysis, but fall out naturally from the account advocated here.

A further consequence of the account is that a third phenomenon customarily linked with verbal and prepositional inflection must be given a separate analysis. This is the case of the pronominal possessive (5), which appears prenominally rather than postnominally as full genitive DPs do, although postnominal emphatic particles are associated with the possessive rather than the noun. Time allowing, I will demonstrate that the possessives are unrelated to the cases discussed in the rest of the paper, and that they are best accounted for under the standard agreement-type analysis.

Incorporation and Local Dislocation differ from agreement in that they are subject to very restrictive locality conditions and do not permit the co-occurrence of multiple exponents. The Irish data discussed in this paper clearly meet both criteria, and therefore are better analysed as pronouns. This paper therefore contributes to the larger problem of differentiating incorporation and affixation under adjacency from agreement phenomena.

Examples:

(1a)   Chuirfinn   isteach ar an phost sin.
COND.1st.sg.-put in   on the job   that
'I would apply for that job.'

(1b)   Chuirfeadh   sibh   isteach ar an phost sin.
COND.ANAL -put 2nd.pl. in   on the job   that
'You (pl.) would apply for that job.'

(1c)   *Chuirfinn   mé isteach ar an phost sin.
COND.1st.sg.-put 1st.sg. in   on the job   that
'I would apply for that job.'

(1d)   * Chuirfeadh   mé isteach ar an phost sin.
   COND.ANAL.-put 1st.sg. in   on the job   that

(2a)   Bhi   mé   ag   caint   leofa   inné.
PAST.ANAL.-be 1st.sg PROG VN-talk 3rd.pl-with yesterday
'I was talking to them yesterday.'

(2b)   Bhi   mé   ag   caint   le Eoghan inné.
PAST.ANAL.-be 1st.sg. PROG VN-talk with Owen   yesterday
'I was talking to Owen yesterday.'

(2c)   * Bhi   mé   ag   caint   leofa   iad/siad inné.
PAST.ANAL.-be 1st.sg. PROG VN-talk 3rd.pl-with 3rd.pl   yesterday
'I was talking to them yesterday.'

(2d)   * Bhi   mé   ag   caint   le iad/siad inné.
PAST.ANAL.-be 1st.sg. PROG VN-talk with 3rd.pl   yesterday

(3)   Deirim   -se nár   fhág   a'baile ariamh...
PRES.1st.sg.-say PTL COMP+NEG PAST.ANAL.-leave home   ever
'I who never left home say...'

(4a)   Bhíos   féin   agus Eoghan i láthair.
PAST.1st.sg.-be REFL and   present
'Eoghan and I were present.'

(4b)   * Bhíos Eoghan agus (mé) féin i láthair.

(4c)   Bhí   Eoghan agus mé (*_pro_) féin i láthair.
PAST.ANAL.-be

(5a)   teach beag suarach thuismitheoiri   Eoghain
house little wretched parent-GEN.PL.   GEN.
'Eoghan's parents' wretched little house'

(5b)   mo   theach beag-sa
1st.sg house little-EMPH
'*my* little house' [not: 'my little *house*' or 'my *little* house']

Selected References:

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