

THE LOSS OF THE IMPERSONAL IN BILINGUAL SPEAKERS OF IRISH

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1. Introduction and sociolinguistic background

This article is a brief examination of a phenomenon attested in contemporary Irish, namely, the loss of the impersonal. This formal change in the grammar of the language is taking place in a context of wholesale restructuring of Irish due to the influence of English. Before we present the details of the change, a few remarks on the sociolinguistics of Irish are in order.

In so far as one can talk about Irish as a first language today, it only survives as one of the first languages of a small number of bilinguals, most of whom are more competent in English. Even in communities where Irish still survives as an L1, children are exposed to L2 varieties of Irish from an early age, in such places as creches and on the Irish-language television station. As a result, the grammar of Irish is increasingly determined by L2 speakers.

Ó Béarra (2007) points out that it is necessary to make a distinction between what he terms Traditional Late Modern Irish, the variety of Irish spoken in Irish-speaking communities as an L1 until the 1960s, and Non-Traditional Late Modern Irish, which is spoken either as one of two first languages, or only as a second language. The latter has been heavily influenced by English. In the words of Ó Béarra (2007: 262), ‘knowledge of English is a pre-requisite to the understanding of Non-Traditional Late Modern Irish...While no-one is immune from the influence of English, the main offenders are the media, journalists of every description, and the thousands who are learning Irish as a second language’. The author also sees translation as responsible for the Englishing of traditional Irish: ‘Thus, the majority of those working in the translation industry are non-native speakers... all too often these translators follow the syntax and idiomatic conventions of English’ (Ó Béarra 2007: 265).

While we accept Ó Béarra’s distinction between the two varieties of Irish, we alter the terminology in our article slightly for ease of reference. Late Modern Irish (LMI) is the language spoken c.1700-c.1970 by L1 speakers. Neo-Irish (NI) refers to the new variety, influenced by English and L2 speakers of Irish.

After this brief expose of the sociolinguistic situation, we can proceed to look at the data we are concerned with in this article.

2. The impersonal and the resultative

LMI lacks a passive construction like that of English. Instead, it uses an impersonal. Thus, (1a) would be translated as (1b):

- (1) a. The work was done quickly.
 b. *Rinneadh an obair go tapaidh.*
 do.Impers.Past the work quickly

In present-day Irish, particularly in the language of broadcasting, this impersonal is being replaced by a periphrastic construction which closely resembles its English counterpart, so that instead of (1b) we often hear:

- (2) *Bhí an obair déanta go tapaidh.*
 was the work do.Past.Part quickly

It is tempting to view (2) as a straightforward calque on (1a). However, it should be borne in mind that LMI also has a resultative perfect construction which resembles (2) very closely, apart from the presence of the adverb *go tapaidh*:

- (3) *Bhí an obair déanta.*
 was the work do.Past.Part
 ‘The work was done’. (resultative perfect)

(3) would be appropriate to describe a state, e.g. in the following sentence:

- (4) *Nuair a tháinig mé abhaile, bhí an obair déanta.*
 when PRT came I home was the work do.Past.Part
 ‘When I came home, the work was done (completed)’.

Rather than viewing (3) as a calque, it might be better to regard it as an extension of the semantics of the resultative perfect to include an event reading. In other words, NI makes use of an existing resource to create a new passive.

At the same time, one cannot ignore the influence of English on this semantic extension. English-Irish bilingualism goes back a long way, to at least the 17th century (see Mac Mathúna 2007 for details), and became widespread in the 19th century. To illustrate the usage of bilingual speakers in this era, we look at some examples taken from the speech of Amhlaoibh Ó Luíne, born in 1872. Like other speakers of LMI born in the 19th century and later, Ó Loingsigh manifests the regular impersonal most of the time. What is interesting from the point of view of the present discussion,

though, is that we find in his speech sporadic examples of what look like the new passive:

- (5) *D'fhanaidís suas déanach Oíche Nollag,*
 used-stay.3pl up late eve Christmas
- agus do bheadh an bloc dóite an oíche sin.*
 and PRT would-be the block burn.PastPart the night that
 'They used stay up late Christmas Eve, and the block would be burnt that night' (SAIL: 75).

In (5) an event reading seems more plausible than a resultative one. But this would require the impersonal conditional rather than the resultative perfect:

- (6) *agus dhófaí an bloc an oíche sin.*
 and burn.Cond.Impers the block the night that

The resultative perfect would be more appropriate if the temporal context were something like *an mhaidin dár gcionn* 'the next morning'.

It looks, then, as though the phenomenon that is so widespread in the NI of the 21st century can be traced back to LMI. In the next section we will try to provide an explanation for the gradual replacement of the impersonal by the passive.

3. Agency and information structure

In (3) above, we encountered an example of the resultative perfect, repeated here:

- (3) *Bhí an obair déanta.*
 was the work do.Past.Part
 'The work was done'. (resultative perfect)

Formally, this resembles a passive, in that the direct object of the corresponding finite sentence is promoted to subject position. Furthermore, like passives in other languages, an agent can optionally be expressed by the equivalent of a *by*-phrase:

- (7) *Bhí an obair déanta ag mo dheartháir.*
 was the work do.Past.Part by my brother

As pointed out by McCloskey (1996: 254), 'This is a "passive" construction in formal terms only.' He goes on to write (255): 'The Irish perfective passive, however, has none of the rhetorical or discourse

functions commonly associated with the passive in, for example, English'. Thus, a sentence like (7) above corresponds to English 'My brother had done the work' rather than 'The work had been done by my brother'. In other words, a resultative perfect with an agent functions in the same way as the active perfect in English.

Now let us consider another example from Amhlaoihb Ó Luínse:

- (8) *Bhíodar coinnithe i Mochromtha leis – ag Hedges.*
 were.3pl keep.Past.Part in Macroom also by Hedges
 (SAIL: 126)

The usual interpretation of this sentence would be:

- (9) Hedges had kept them in Macroom.

The meaning, like in (7), would be that the situation of *keeping them* had preceded some other situation, and that the first situation no longer held. However, it is clear from the context that what is intended by the speaker is eventive rather than resultative, if we consider the passage from which this sentence is taken:

- (10) *Fianna*
Ní bhfaighfá aon fhia anso. Thagaidís ann uaireanta: ó Chill Áirne is mó thagaidís. Bheadh lá muar ar cheann acu san, agus thúrfí an dial d'fhiach dó. Bhíodar coinnithe i Mochromtha leis - ag Hedges. Bhriseadh ceann acu amach anois is arís.

Deer

You wouldn't find any deer here. They used to come here sometimes: they usually came from Killarney. There'd be a big day with one of them, and they'd hunt the living daylights out of it. They were kept in Macroom also – by Hedges. One of them would break out now and then.

It is plain from the context that what is meant is 'They were kept in Macroom (over a period of time) by Hedges', rather than 'Hedges had kept them in Macroom'.¹

¹ Another possible reading is that of what is sometimes called the medial object perfect:

(i) Hedges had them kept in Macroom.

Like the active perfect reading, this also suggests a state resulting from a previous action, rather than a continuous state, and hence strike us as implausible.

One of the features of the Irish impersonal is that it is incompatible with an overt agent. Thus the English passive ‘The work was done by my brother’ would have to be translated by an Irish active:

- (11) *Rinne mo dheartháir an obair.*
 did my brother the work

Likewise, the English sentence ‘They were kept in Macroom by Hedges’ would be translated as (12b) rather than (12a):

- (12) a. **Coinníodh i Mochromtha iad ag Hedges.*
 keep.Impers.Past in Macroom them by Hedges
- b. *Choinnigh Hedges i Mochromtha iad.*
 kept Hedges in Macroom them
 ‘They were kept in Macroom by Hedges’.

Sentences like (8) may well have developed as a response to this gap in the paradigm, as an attempt to combine the impersonal, which had the function of a passive, with the expression of an overt agent.

Another factor that would have favoured the rise of the new passive is connected with information structure. The organization of information in LMI is considerably different from that of English. Take the following sentence:

- (13) This is an interesting book. It was written by a Pole.

A normal LMI translation would be:

- (14) *Seo leabhar spéisiúil. Polannach a scríobh é*
 this book interesting Pole that wrote it
 ‘This is an interesting book. It was a Pole that wrote it.’

Here, the new information, the authorship of the book, is presented by means of fronting of the NP *Polannach*. The new passive, on the other hand, enables a speaker to maintain the information structure of English:

- (15) *Seo leabhar spéisiúil. Bhí sé scríofa ag Polannach.*
 this book interesting was it write.PastPart by Pole

In the current linguistic climate, where material is translated rapidly from English and presented to speakers unfamiliar with the information structure of LMI, it is understandable why the syntax should mirror that of English. An L2 speaker of Irish would have much greater difficulty processing (14) than (15). And of course the restructuring makes the job of the translator

much easier, and allows people with a fairly tenuous grasp of LMI to work in this area.

4. Conclusion

This brief glance at a change that is taking place in NI has centred on the representation of passive semantics in Irish. As we observed, the old impersonal of LMI is rapidly giving way to a new passive, one that reflects very faithfully the structure of English. We also observed that this tendency is not an entirely new one, going back as it does to at least the 19th century. We have suggested that the motive for the change is two-fold: a desire to allow for the expression of agents with passives, and a need to imitate the information structure of English for an audience consisting almost entirely of L2 speakers of English. The first might be considered a motive which might arise language-internally, while the second can only be regarded as due to external pressure.

In normal linguistic conditions, one could imagine the kind of variation exhibited by Amhlaoibh Ó Luínse persisting for some time, with the new passive gradually replacing the impersonal. In the kind of conditions described by Ó Béarra (2007), the pace of change is speeded up. If Irish is still spoken in fifty years time, it would not be surprising if the old impersonal had not become part of the history of Irish, like many of the grammatical features which are present in prescriptive grammars, but rapidly receding in real speech.

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Abbreviation

SAIL = Ó Cróinín, S., ed., 1980, *Seanachas Amhlaoibh Í Luínse* [*The Lore of Amhlaoibh Ó Luínse*], Dublin: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann.

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