

Old Irish denominal and deadjectival deponents

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o. Overview of the problem

Old Irish has a set of denominal and deadjectival deponent verbs (hereafter simply “denominals”) that are frequently transitive, which is unexpected for verbs with middle morphology. I argue that a transitivization process converted original anti-causatives into their transitive counterparts. To explain this transitivization process, I follow Kallulli (2007, 2009) and adopt primitives on v^o and a reanalysis of passive morphology as containing not only a [-external argument] feature, but also a [+activity] feature. Transitive deponents thus end up as back-formations from passives.

1. Old Irish verbal system in brief

Old Irish has distinct active, middle, and passive paradigms, where the active and middle are lexically determined and the passive is oppositional:

(1) Active:

ad·cí	ro·an	mairbfid
PRV·see.PRES.3SG.ACT	PRF·remain.PRET.3SG.ACT	kill.FUT.3SG.ACT
“he sees”	“he remained”	“he will kill”

(2) Middle:

ní·ágathar	suidigistir	ní·comalnabathar
NEG·fear.PRES.3SG.MIDD	place.PRET.3SG.MIDD	NEG·fulfill.FUT.3SG.MIDD
“he does not fear”	“he placed”	“he will not fulfill”

(3) Passive:

ní·áigther	ro·suidigid	mairbfidir
NEG·fear.PRES.3SG.PASS	PRF·place.PRET.3SG.PASS	kill.FUT.3SG.PASS
“he is not feared”	“it has been placed”	“he will be killed”

The Middle:

- morphology on the decline; disappears shortly after the Old Irish period
- as a voice, already obsolete in Classical Old Irish, but very likely functional until very recently
- can be divided into various classes: strong / weak; denom. / deverb., etc.
- the *-aig-* class of middles is the focus here

2. The *-aig-* verbs, background: Joseph (1987)

- either transitive (generally factitive) or intransitive, sometimes both
- have either a noun or adjective as base
 - suidigidir* “places” (tr.); cf. *suide* “seat”
 - sonairtnaigidir* “becomes strong” (intr.); cf. *sonairt* “strong”
 - dechraigidir* “is distinguished, distinguishes (intr./tr.); cf. *dechur* “difference”

- formal correspondence in British Celtic shows two classes:
 one class just like OIr., with nouns and adj. forming intrans. or trans.
 second class, not found in OIr., has only nouns as a base:
 MW *brwynnha* “gather rushes”; cf. *brwyn* “rushes”
 MW *chuedlauha* “gossip”; cf. *chwedlau* “news”
 not clear if the second class is older, i.e. original (Joseph 1987: 140), or younger,
 i.e. a British innovation (a possibility suggested to me by Stefan Schumacher)
- Joseph argues that the verbs are derived from nominal compounds:
 *X-sag- “having the seeking of X” (cf. OIr. *saigid* “seeks”)
 > *X-sagī- “has the seeking of X”
 denominal derivation explains weak inflection

Some unanswered questions:

- why is the formation deponent?
- why is it frequently transitive?
- is the transitivity random or distributed according to some pattern?

3. The *-aig-* verbs, form and meaning

- the transitive / factitive meanings are somewhat surprising:
 - deponents are not prototypically transitive / ergative
 - cf. Latin: denominals with causative sense are active, but with non-causative senses (“to be or act X”, “to act like Y”, etc.) are deponent (Xu, Aronoff & Anshen 2007)
 - opens the question of why the *-aig-* denominals are deponent at all
- Aside on OIr. middle as a type of active:
 - the deponents not oppositional, so they could be a type of active
 - transitive meaning would be ok
 - merely displaces the problem:
 - some distributional features (see below) would remain puzzling
 - since the oppositional middle was most likely only recently lost, *-aig-* denominals became productive while the middle was still a middle (or more likely, an undifferentiated non-active; see below)
- Conclusion: in the context of the rise of the *-aig-* denominals, the deponents must be treated as a (disintegrating) type of non-active

Back to question of why *-aig-* denominals are deponent:

- not a necessary feature of denominals: compare the largely older and non-productive stratum of (mostly) active and transitive denominals:
 - *ā*-verbs frequently factitive; usually trans., sometimes deponent:
 - *móraid*, *·móra* “magnifies”, cf. *mór* “large”
 - *for·cenna* “terminates”, cf. *forcenn* “end”
 - *comal·naithir* “fulfills”, cf. *comlann* “full, complete”
 - *cobraithir* “helps”, cf. *cobair* “help”
 - *ī*-verbs sometimes trans., sometimes intrans.:
 - *cinnid*, *·cinni* “completes; defines”, cf. *cenn* “end(-point)”
 - *ad·toíbi* “adheres”, cf. *toib* “side”

Claim: The trans. / factitive meaning of *-aig-* denominatives is secondary.

- Joseph (1987) established 11 words as the likely locus of the *-aig-* formation: in Irish and both branches of British Celtic (Welsh and Breton/Cornish)
 - OIr. ***béoaigidir*** “vivifies, makes alive”: only transitive
 - OIr. ***cuimnigidir*** “remembers”: probably transitive
 - OIr. *réidigidir* “is clear, makes clear”: unclear if trans. or intrans. in oldest usage
 - MIr. ***doimnigidir*** “is low, lowers”: trans. and intrans.
 - MIr. ***fannaigidir*** “grows weak, weakens”: trans. and intrans.
 - MIr. *garbaigidir* “becomes rough”: intransitive
 - MIr. ***núigidir*** “is new, renews”: trans. and intrans.
 - MIr. noun *glanaige* “purifier”; from verb with unclear transitivity
 - MIr. noun ***meblugud*** “shaming”; presupposes transitive verb
 - MIr. ***blassaigidir*** “tastes”: transitive
 - OIr. ***ísligidir*** “lowers”: transitive
- the connection with factitives is clear (bolded examples), but more apposite is the ergative / anticausative sense: all verbs other than *blassaigidir* “tastes” (and maybe *cuimnigidir* “remembers”) fall into this category
- the primary function of the *-aig-* denominatives in late Insular Celtic was to build anticausatives
- the prominent factitive meaning is due to a later transitivization operation

Support:

- anticausative sense fits well with deponent morphology (i.e. it is a typical function of the non-active to express anticausatives)
- should be noted that even in the factitives, there are hints that the earlier non-active use is primary: *blassaigidir* “tastes” and *ísligidir* “lowers” in oldest attestations only passive or reflexive (typically non-active uses)
- similar pattern seen in many other *-aig-* deponents:
 - *cathaigidir* “fights” (intr.)
 - *fergaigidir* “grows angry (intr.), makes angry (only pass.)”
 - *fograigidir* “sounds (intr.), pronounces (only pass.)”
 - *gúaigidir* “tells a lie (intr.), falsifies (only pass.)”
 - *inbothaigidir* “weds” (intr.)
 - *sonairtnaigidir* “becomes strong”
- **but:** *ainmnigidir* “names” (tr.)
 - *foilsigidir* “manifests” (tr.)
 - *fortachtaigidir* “helps” (intr. and tr.)
 - *suidigidir* “places” (tr.)

Summary: The pairing of non-active morphology with transitive / factitive meaning is not surprising if the transitive / factitive meaning is secondary. The middle morphology is a relic of the original anticausative meaning.

Question: How and why did the transitive / factitive sense develop?

4. The transitivization of anticausatives

Adopting some assumptions current in the syntactic and historical literature allows an avenue for explaining the transitivization of the deponents.

- assume that the differentiation of passive and deponent in Old Irish is late (this is slightly controversial; pro: McCone 2006: 74-96, con: Jasanoff 1997; while McCone's specific proposal cannot be correct (see Griffith 2009), Jasanoff's proposal can probably be adapted to fit with the approach argued for here)
- assume a number of theoretical arguments in Kallulli (2007, 2009) on the passive / anticausative distinction.

- (1) *The window was cracked by / *from the pressure.*
- (2) *The window cracked *by / from the pressure.*

If by-phrase shows an external argument in passives, so does from-phrase in anticausatives. Albanian data adds important additional information (examples from Kallulli 2009: 275):

- | | | | | | |
|-----|------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|---------|
| (3) | <i>Ben-it</i> | <i>i-u</i> | <i>thye</i> | <i>një vazo</i> | = (15a) |
| | Ben-the _{DAT} | him _{CL} -NACT | break.AOR.3S | a vase _{NOM} | |
| | (i) | 'Ben unintentionally broke a vase' | | | |
| | (ii) | *'Ben felt like breaking a vase' | | | |
| (4) | <i>Ben-it</i> | <i>i</i> | <i>thy-hej</i> | <i>një vazo</i> | = (15b) |
| | Ben-the _{DAT} | him _{CL} | break-NACT.P.IMP.3S | a vase _{NOM} | |
| | (i) | 'Ben felt like breaking a vase' | | | |
| | (ii) | *'Ben unintentionally broke a vase' | | | |
| (5) | <i>Ben-it</i> | <i>i-u</i> | <i>hëngër</i> | <i>një mollë</i> | = (16a) |
| | Ben-the _{DAT} | him _{CL} -NACT | eat.AOR.3S | an apple _{NOM} | |
| | (i) | 'Ben felt like eating an apple' | | | |
| | (ii) | *'Ben unintentionally ate an apple' | | | |
| (6) | <i>Ben-it</i> | <i>i</i> | <i>ha-hej</i> | <i>një mollë</i> | = (16b) |
| | Ben-the _{DAT} | him _{CL} | eat-NACT.P.IMP.3S | an apple _{NOM} | |
| | (i) | 'Ben felt like eating an apple' | | | |
| | (ii) | *'Ben unintentionally ate an apple' | | | |

Kallulli's argument (2009):

- the distinctions of meaning in (3) to (6) can only result from the interaction of different primitives with non-active morphology
- there are feature-bundles on v^o (Embick 2004, Folli & Harley 2005)
- specifically:
 - [+cause] for change of state verbs
 - [+act(ivity)] for activity verbs
 - [-ext(ernal) arg(ument)] blocks overt DP in Spec of vP
- crucial further claim: non-active / passive morphology realizes (or is being reanalyzed as a morpheme realizing) the [+act] feature in conjunction with [-external argument]

Features in v^o		
a.	[+act]	Ben ate the apple.
b.	[+act] [-ext arg]	The apple was eaten (by Ben).
c.	[+cause]	The pressure cracked the window.
d.	[+cause] [-ext arg]	The window cracked (from the pressure).
e.	[+cause] [+act]	John cleaned the table.
f.	[+cause] [+act] [-ext arg]	The table was cleaned (by John).
g.	[-ext arg]	John arrived.

Table 1: Features in v^o and argument expression and interpretation (from Kallulli 2009)

Proposal:

- Insular Celtic middles were actually non-actives, that is, ambiguous between passive and middle (as suggested above):
 - **wogaro-sagītor* “sounds (intr.), is sounded”
 - **sunerti-sagītor* “strengthens (intr.), is strengthened”
 - **wollestu-sagītor* “is clear, is made clear”
- non-active morphology may be reanalyzed as [+act] when [-ext arg] is also present (Kallulli 2009)
- under the reanalysis, forms like the Insular Celtic non-actives above may be [+cause] **and** [+act] (with [-ext arg])
- because [+act] (actor-initiation) is incompatible with anticausatives, the non-active morphology could be dropped as a repair strategy (Kallulli 2009):

ní-dechriget	/	nī-dechrigetar
NEG·differ.PRES.3PL.ACT		NEG·differ.PRES.3PL.MIDDLE
“they do not differ”		“they do not differ”
- the reanalysis further led to the split of the non-active into middle and passive (aided by differentiation in preterite and some presents):¹
 - [+cause] [-ext arg] (w/o [+act] interpretation) became the middle
 - [+cause] [-ext arg] with [+act] interpretation became the passive
- the passive could then be interpreted as the passive of a transitive verb:
 - *fograigidir* “sounds (intr.), pronounces (trans.; only passive)”
 - *fergaigidir* “grows angry, angers (trans.; only passive)”
 - *gúaigidir* “lies (intr.), falsifies (trans.; only passive)”
- in some verbs, the passive form in the anticausative / passive pairing was taken to be primary, and the old middle form simply took on active meaning, either instead of or beside the anticausative meaning:
 - *suidigidir* “places” (sometimes *suidigid*)
 - *foilsigidir* “reveals, manifests” (sometimes *foilsigid*)
 - *cosmailigidir* “compares (trans.), is like (intr.)”
- This account covers the attested diversity of forms in Old Irish.

¹ The formal expression of the split probably looked like this: mediopassive sg. **iselo-sagītor*, pl. **iselo-sagintro* split into medial sg. **iselo-sagītro*, pl. **iselo-sagintro* and passive sg. **iselo-sagītor*, pl. **iselo-sagintor* (basically Jasanoff’s 1997 argument, but displaced to Insular Celtic instead of Proto-Celtic).

5. Further implications: the Old Irish imperfect

Etymologically difficult, but in part (largely?) derived from the Indo-European secondary (i.e. preterital) middle endings (Thurneysen 1946: 371-372, Hollifield 1978, Schrijver 1992, etc.).

- There is no distinction of middle and active in the imperfect.
- Traditional assumption: without active - middle opposition, the old deponent endings simply developed active meaning.
- Present account can give a positive reason for this:
 - assume the preterital non-active endings acquired the [+act] interpretation like the presential endings
 - the same transitive interpretation occurred here as in the *-aig-* denominatives
 - the preterite middle endings took over transitive / active sense, but [+act] was interpreted aspectually here: “activity can be understood as open-endedness, or durativity” (Kallulli 2009: 279 n. 17)
 - the preterital force of the originally middle endings combined with the durativity or open-endedness to create an active imperfect
- one peculiarity of the imperfect endings: unlike everywhere else in the system, 3pl. passive and active are the same; is plausible if the active developed from the passive

6. Summary of conclusions

Philological aspect:

- transitive meanings frequently only occur in the passive
- the *-aig-* denominals were originally intransitive, specifically anticausative

Theoretical aspect:

- deponent inflection of *-aig-* denominals reflects their origin as anticausatives in an active / non-active system
- reinterpretation of non-active inflection as [+act] (à la Kallulli 2007, 2009) caused:
 - non-blocking effects of anticausatives (attested in many verbs)
 - split of non-active into middle and passive (systematic in Old Irish)
- new passives interpreted as passives of (unattested) transitive actives (situation attested for a number of verbs)
- middle forms then often reinterpreted as active counterpart to the passive
 - anticausative meaning sometimes lost
 - sometimes coexisted with active
- imperfect endings also derived from older preterital non-active endings via a similar split into middle and passive, with the middle becoming neutral to transitivity

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