

A diachronic explanation for a synchronic phenomenon:
the genesis of the animacy hierarchy in the Old Irish *notae augentes*

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0. General Background

The *notae augentes* are pronominal clitics with the following forms:

| | | | |
|-----------|---------------------------|-----|------------------------|
| 1sg | -sa / -se (once -sea) | 1pl | -nai / -ni (once -sni) |
| 2sg | -so, -su / -siu | 2pl | -si |
| 3sg m / n | -som, -sum / -seom, -sium | 3pl | -som, -sum |
| 3sg f | -sí | | |

They may appear in the following contexts (GOI 252-3):

- after a noun, agreeing with a preceding possessive pronoun
- after a personal pronoun or conjugated preposition
- after a copula + noun / adjective sequence, serving as the subject
- after a verb, agreeing with either the subject or the infixed object

Function: unclear, but not emphatic (see Green 1973: 122ff); my current proposal:

- The *notae augentes* are pure pronouns.
- They may additionally refer to the TOPIC of the discourse.

Examples of *notae augentes* with verbs:

- (1) Wb 27^a19 *amal ro-t-gád-sa* “as I have besought you (sg)”
- (2) MI 44^b10-11 *ro-m-leicis-se* “you (sg) have left me”
- (3) Wb 32^a25 *do-n-genae-siu* “that you (sg) will do it”
- (4) MI 43^b11 *for-tat-tet-siu* “it helps you (sg)”
- (5) MI 29^a3 *for-ta-comai-som* “he preserves it (*scíam* ‘figure’ f.)”
- (6) MI 61^a1 *ind huall ro-d-n-gab-som* “the pride which had seized him”

1. The distribution of the *notae augentes*

When attached to verbs with an infixed pronoun, the *nota augens* must agree with whichever ARGUMENT (subject or object) appears highest on the following scale (Griffith, forthcoming):

1st person > 2nd person > 3rd person human > 3rd person non-human

Non-humans are last in the hierarchy because *notae* refer (almost) exclusively to humans.

Central Question: HOW COULD THIS EXCEPTIONLESS HIERARCHY HAVE ARISEN?

2. Typological considerations

- Many languages rank pronouns, with the most common ordering being 1st > 2nd > 3rd.
- The facts in Irish could simply result from this established universal.¹

¹ Kiparsky (2008) argues for the universality of the hierarchy and says that, as such, it belongs to Universal Grammar. He does not, however, address a few cases that violate the hierarchy, such as the ranking 2nd > 1st in some Algonquian languages (see Macaulay 2005 for an overview of the phenomenon in Algonquian).

- That the distribution of *notae augentes* conforms to the hierarchy does not mean that the hierarchy is what determined the outcome.
- The question is thus whether we must use the language universal to explain the observed phenomenon or whether some other explanation appears more likely.

To resolve the question, this paper will investigate whether we can explain the hierarchy of the *notae augentes* in Old Irish via means other than resorting to the animacy hierarchy.

- If we cannot, we must suggest that the universal is responsible for the order and that Old Irish gives positive support to the universal.
- If a language-internal explanation is available, however, that finding will be of interest and will suggest that universals need not be invoked.

3. Inner-Irish evidence for the rise of the hierarchy

Assumptions:

- The *notae augentes* as post-verbal clitics in Old Irish developed recently, probably post-apocope (cf. McCone 2006: 216-7 for a largely similar chronology).
- Agreement of the *notae* with the subject preceded agreement with the infixed object (see also below).
- The rigid hierarchy developed after agreement with infixed objects began to be possible.

To show why 3rd person is low-ranked, we must observe two key restrictions on the appearance of the *notae augentes*:

- They never co-occur with an overt subject:
 - **ad-cí-som in fer in mnaí* “the man sees the woman”
- They never occur on a verb with subject relative antecedent:
 - **is in fer ad-chí-som in mnaí* “it is the man who sees the woman”

These restrictions do not affect other persons:

- Overt subject pronouns do not appear with 1st or 2nd persons (GOI 254)
 - *biri(-siu) in fer* “you (sg) carry the man” not **biri tú in fer*
- Old Irish verbs with subject relative antecedent can only be 3rd person
 - MI 47^a2 *is me-se nad-frithchomart nech* (verb is 3rd sg!)
“it is I who have not injured anyone”
 - MI 130^c3 *me-sse· ass-id-beir libera* (verb is 3rd sg!)
“[it is] I who say it: libera”

Result: 3rd person *notae* are frequently barred from appearing as the subject of a verb, in which case a non-3rd person *nota* may to be attached to agree with the infixed object:

- MI 33^a19 *ind-i fo-dam-segat-sa* “they who trouble me”
- Wb11^b4 *no-b·sóirfa-si dia* “God will free you (pl)”

That *notae* agreed with infixed non-3rd person objects was further supported by passives, since only 1st and 2nd persons could be infixed and the *notae* only ever agreed with the infixed pronoun, never the “dummy” 3rd sg verb:²

- MI 29^d7 *no-m-deithidnighther-sa* “I am troubled”
- Wb 20^a15 *do-[b]forbad-si* “you (pl) have been cut off”

Given the restrictions on the 3rd person *notae augentes*, it becomes clear that in verbs with 1st or 2nd person infixed pronouns and 3rd person subjects, the infixed pronouns will receive a *nota* much more frequently.

² This explanation of the spread of the *notae augentes* to agree with infixed objects accords well chronologically with Cowgill’s explanation of the development of the synthetic passive (1983), since both arose post-apocope.

Hypothesis: The preponderance of *notae* agreeing with a 1st or 2nd person infixed pronoun in 3rd person verbs developed over time from a simple trend into a fixed rule.³

It must still be explained why infixed 3rd person objects cannot have *notae augentes* in verbs with 1st or 2nd person subjects. For this, it is useful to look at how often a *nota augens* appears in Old Irish relative to how often it could appear. The data are presented in the following table with percentages first and raw numbers in parentheses (the number of examples with a *nota* present divided by the total number of examples where a *nota* is possible):

| | subject with <i>nota augens</i> | | infix object with <i>nota augens</i> | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| | singular | plural | singular | plural |
| 1 st | 39% (156 / 401) | 28% (80 / 289) | 47% (35 / 75) | 36% (24 / 66) |
| 2 nd | 24% (44 / 182) | 23% (74 / 317) | 8% (1 / 13) | 21% (12 / 57) |
| 3 rd masc | 18% (219 / 1214) | 7% (45 / 684) | 13% (4 / 32) | 13% (3 / 23) |
| 3 rd fem | 8% (1 / 13) | | 0% (0 / 3) | |

Table 1: Percentage of time a *nota augens* appears on a verb⁴

- if a verb had a *nota* agreeing with the subject, it could not then receive one for the infixed pronoun; if there was no subject *nota*, an object *nota* could be attached.
- these assumptions follow if *notae* must have first been attached to verbs as subject markers and only later could agree with infixed objects (see fn 2); this is possible regardless of whether the *notae augentes* developed from pronouns (McCone 2006: 215-7) or deictic markers (Schrijver 1997: 22-4).
- the figures above show that a *nota augens* agreeing with a 3rd person infixed object was uncommon even when possible; it follows from this fact that in verbs with a 1st or 2nd person subject and 3rd person infixed object, the object only very rarely had a *nota*.

Hypothesis: The rarity of *notae* agreeing with a 3rd person infixed pronoun relative to 1st or 2nd person subject developed over time from a simple trend into a mandatory ban.⁵

Upshot: we can explain how non-3rd person *notae* are preferred to 3rd person *notae*.

- for verbs with 3rd person subjects:
 - restrictions on the appearance of 3rd person subject *notae* skew the examples so most *notae* agree with the infixed object (1st and 2nd person)
- for verbs with 3rd person infixed pronouns:
 - relative frequency of *notae* agreeing with 1st and 2nd person subjects and relative infrequency with 3rd person objects skews the data
- in both cases it is reasonable to assume that a child learning the language could make a generalization that 3rd person *notae* are incompatible with a non-3rd person ARGUMENT.

³ Statistics support the contention: of the 60 non-passive verbs in the Thesaurus with 3rd person subjects and non-3rd person infixed objects, 25 have an overt or relative subject (i.e. could not have a 3rd person *nota*). This figure (gathered from Griffith, forthcoming) suggests a skew would quickly affect the distribution over time.

⁴ The data are gathered from Würzburg and the first 53 folios of Milan (roughly 38% of the total number of glosses). For the third person subject *notae*, the data is from Griffith (forthcoming) and encompasses all of Milan and Würzburg. 3rd person agreement of a *nota* with a neuter is ignored, since it is almost non-existent in Old Irish. Also, note that a *nota augens* can only agree with a 3rd person object if the subject is also 3rd person. Furthermore, to be sure that the agreement is with the object, the subject must be overt, relative or non-human (or one ARGUMENT is fem and the other masc or plural). Very few examples meet these criteria, thus explaining the very small sample size for 3rd person infixed objects.

⁵ The type with proleptic infixed pronoun (see Lucht 1994) would also have skewed the data against *nota augentes* agreeing with 3rd person infixed pronouns, but this type was probably too rare to have had a large impact: of the 50 exx. in the Thesaurus with non-3rd person subjects and 3rd person infixed pronouns, the infixed pronoun is pleonastic in only two (Wb 18^a12 and Ml 57^d3).

The argument for 1st person > 2nd person is more difficult, but examining the frequency of *notae* with 1st and 2nd person verbs and infixed pronouns provides a possible answer. Table 1 above again provides the necessary data:

- Given the frequency of *notae* with 1st and 2nd person verbs, a skew once again develops:
 - *do-b-biur* “I bring you (pl)” may have a 1sg *nota* about 39% of the time but a 2pl *nota* 21% of the time that the 1sg *nota* is not there, i.e. only 13% of the time (= 21% x (100% - 39%))
 - this skew works (in varying degrees) for all combinations of 1st and 2nd person subjects and objects and may therefore explain how, over time, the hierarchy 1st > 2nd developed
- Caveat 1: it is unknown whether the frequencies of the *notae augentes* with the various persons was the same prehistorically or whether the more frequent appearance of 1st person *notae* than 2nd person *notae* and 2nd than 3rd is a direct result of the hierarchy’s influence.
- Caveat 2: even if the frequency of the *notae* (1st > 2nd > 3rd) was the same in Pre-OIr, the question remains as to why. Since the 1st person is more topic-worthy (Wierzbicka 1981), the greater frequency of first person *notae* would be explicable if they encode TOPIC, as tentatively suggested above (page 1). An answer clearly depends on being better able to pinpoint the precise function of the *notae augentes*.

4. Results and Conclusions

- The hierarchy non-3rd person > 3rd person, found in many languages⁶, could have arisen within pre-Old Irish via restrictions on 3rd person *notae augentes*.
- The ranking of 1st person > 2nd person can also be motivated by the fact that *notae augentes* simply appear more often with a 1st person than a 2nd person.
- In both cases, the animacy hierarchy in Old Irish can arise via language transmission, i.e. children reanalyzing dominant patterns as the only permitted pattern in the grammar.

It appears, then, that although the distribution of the *notae augentes* in Old Irish conforms to the animacy hierarchy, the hierarchy is not the cause of the distribution. Rather, by examining the distribution and frequency of the *notae* with different persons and numbers, we can develop a plausible historical explanation for the genesis of the hierarchy.

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⁶ See Siewierska (2006: 148ff.), who notes that there are many languages in which 1st and 2nd person are marked on the verb, but not 3rd. Though no examples are given there, the Tibetan language Nocte can be cited (see Siewierska 2006: 55-6 and DeLancey 1981: 641ff).