

### The decline of the Old Irish deponent\*

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#### o. Introduction.

Old Irish, like most older Indo-European languages, has a set of deponent endings beside the normal active ones. While the endings are without function in Classical Old Irish, it is quite likely that they encoded an oppositional middle meaning, as in Ancient Greek, until a very late point in Pre-Irish. I have suggested (Griffith 2010), that a trace of their original function as middles is still detectable in the distribution of some forms and meanings in the *-aig-* verbs. Since, however, the deponent endings are synchronically essentially meaningless, it is not a surprise that they are being replaced by the active ones already within the Old Irish period.

Strachan (1893) presents an extensive treatment of this decline, and he is correct in most major points, but he focuses more on the disappearance of the deponent inflection after the Glosses, while my primary interest lies in the deponents in the Glosses themselves, where the category is best preserved. The goal here is to examine the fate of the deponent endings within the Old Irish Glosses, to see whether we can say more about their early history and possibly their prehistory.

#### 1. Strachan 1893.

- collects forms of deponent verbs and divides them by text dates and genres (Glosses, Irish Hymns, Cormac’s Glossary, old heroic texts, short religious stories, Reglum Mochuta Rathin, Féilire Oengusso, Tripartite Life of St. Patrick, poetry from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, religious texts in LU, later heroic texts)
- divides the verbs into *-aig-* verbs and non-*-aig-* verbs and sorts forms according to active or deponent inflection
  - discusses the two classes of verbs separately
  - includes in the non-*-aig-* class verbs which are deponent only in part of the paradigm (mostly the preterite)
- observations / claims:
  - the non-*-aig-* verbs form a compact class and they are clearly connected with the Indo-European deponent verbs
  - the active endings are found more frequently in the *-aig-* verbs than in the others, but in all classes the change to active inflection has begun
  - the active endings are less common in Würzburg (oldest gloss collection) and more common in Milan (for him the youngest collection)
  - the future of *-aig-* verbs nearly always has active forms outside 1sg., but all examples come from Milan
  - Sg. has active 1sg. very frequently
- assumes that deponential inflection had largely disintegrated by the middle of the tenth century, perhaps even the beginning of the century

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#### Criticisms / Weaknesses:

- some forms left out
- the analysis is more impressionistic than numerical
- division of verbs into *-aig-* and non-*-aig-* classes may not be the most effective one:
  - denominal / deadjectival verbs vs. deverbal / deradical verbs
  - weak verbs vs. strong verbs
  - weak forms vs. strong forms

#### 2. The data.

- Collection of deponent verb forms from Strachan (1893); see Appendix for forms not in Strachan
- Statistics: used to determine whether two categories are significantly different from one another
  - Fisher’s Exact Test used to determine the p-value
  - p-value shows whether the compared values are independent
  - if  $p < 0.05$ , the two categories are independent, i.e. the difference is statistically significant and in need of explanation.

#### Excluded forms:

- all 2<sup>nd</sup> person plurals
- all 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular imperatives
- the present / preterite forms of the pretero-present verbs *ro-fidir* (Wb. 39x, Ml. 15x) and *do-futharcair* (Wb. 3x, Ml. 2x)
- forms from verbs deponent only in one tense outside present (e.g. *ad-cí* or *do-icc*)

	Active	Deponent
Würzburg	17	143
Milan	98	377

Table 1: Deponent verbs in Wb. and Ml.;  $p = 0.004230$

- Concern: the future not evenly distributed (Würzburg 14 exx. vs. Milan 54 exx.)
- Milan and Würzburg either agree w.r.t. the distribution of active / deponent for a person / number category

--or--

- there are no attestations of the person / number category in at least one of the manuscripts (see Tables 2 and 3).

	Würzburg (Act./Dep.)	Milan (Act./Dep.)
1sg.	0 Act. / 1 Dep.	0 Act. / 2 Dep.
2sg.	none attested	none attested
3sg.	0 Act. / 4 Dep.	0 Act. / 4 Dep.
1pl.	0 Act. / 3 Dep.	none attested
3pl.	none attested	3 Act. / 2 Dep.

Table 2: non-*f-* futures in Wb. and Ml.

	Würzburg (Act./Dep.)	Milan (Act./Dep.)
1sg.	0 Act. / 2 Dep.	2 Act. / 6 Dep.
2sg.	none attested	5 Act. / 1 Dep.
3sg.	none attested	15 Act. / 4 Dep.
1pl.	1 Act. / 2 Dep.	none attested
3pl.	0 Act. / 1 Dep.	7 Act. / 3 Dep.

Table 3: *f*-futures in Wb. and MI.

**The problem:** for *f*-future, deponent inflection does not allow a distinction between 2sg., 3sg., and 3sg. pass. or between 3pl. and 3pl. pass. (absolute for *-aig*-verbs, frequent for other verbs).

2sg.	<i>a n-nu-n-adbartaiġfe</i> (MI.) <i>nundun-daingnichfe</i> (MI.) <i>ilaigfe</i> (MI.)	<i>mescaigfider</i> (MI.) <i>dundam-roimnife-se</i> (MI.) <i>folnaibe</i> (MI.)
3sg.	<i>comaicsigfid</i> (MI.) <i>connacha-dánaigfea</i> (MI.) <i>imdaigfid</i> (MI.) <i>nud-comálnabadar</i> (MI.) <i>fuchéillfea</i> (MI.)	<i>suidigfith</i> (MI.) <i>ad-dánaigfea</i> (MI.) <i>ní-deintamlafa</i> (MI.) <i>fom-thochsgaibedar</i> (MI.) <i>ad-áichfedar</i> (MI.)
pass. sg.	<i>fom-chridigfider-sa</i> (MI.) <i>comallaibther</i> (MI.)	<i>úaibrigfidir</i> (MI.) <i>ní-imdídínibther</i> (Wb.)
3pl.	<i>deugaigfit</i> (MI.) <i>cumachtaigfet</i> (MI.) <i>comallaibte</i> (MI.) <i>du-roimnibetar</i> (MI.)	<i>dechraílgfjet</i> (MI.) <i>treimfeidligfet</i> (MI.) <i>fo-chélfatar</i> (Wb.) <i>ní-áichfetar</i> (MI.)
pass. pl.	<i>míchlothaigfetar</i> (MI.)	<i>comallaibtir</i> (MI.)

**Solution:** Milan adopted active inflection in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> sg. and 3<sup>rd</sup> pl.; unclear for Würzburg (only one comparable form).

Relevance here: Must exclude *f*-future forms from tables<sup>1</sup>

- attestation of the *f*-futures uneven (Wb. 6x vs. MI. 43x)
- very strong bias toward active inflection in the category
- inclusion would skew any comparisons between the two gloss collections

Removing the *f*-futures yields the following attestations:

	Active	Deponent
Würzburg	16	138
Milan	69	363

Table 4: Deponent verbs in Wb. and MI. without *f*-futures; p = 0.08031

<sup>1</sup> The non-*f*-futures are more comparable between Wb. and MI.: and the number of attestations are similar and the categories represented are similar. It seems reasonable not to exclude them, though one might argue that it is better to exclude all future forms rather than a simple subset thereof.

- without the *f*-futures, active vs. deponent in Wb. and MI. not statistically significant (though close)
- regardless of the fact that the p-value is slightly above 0.05, our concern is finding where similarities / differences in the data lie
- can examine sub-groups of the data :
  - *-aig*-verbs
  - non-*aig*-denominals (incl. deadjectival verbs)
  - deverbals (incl. deradical verbs)

The verbs (or verbal bases) in Wb. and MI.:

<u>denominal</u>		<u>deverbal</u>
<i>airlithir</i> “counsels”	< <i>airle</i> “counsel”	<i>ro-fitir</i> “knows”
<i>comalnaitir</i> “fulfills”	< <i>comlam</i> “complete”	<i>ro-laimethar</i> “dares”
<i>fo-cíallathar</i> “pays heed”	< <i>ciall</i> “sense, meaning”	<i>midithir</i> “measures”
<i>labraithir</i> “speaks”	< <i>labar</i> “talkative”	<i>ro-cluinethar</i> “hears”
<i>samlathar</i> “compares”	< <i>samail</i> “likeness”	<i>gainithir</i> “is born”
<i>fris-áilethar</i> “expects”	< <i>áil</i> “request, wish”	<i>-moinethar</i> “thinks”
<i>folnaitir</i> “rules”	< <i>follán</i> “sound, hale”	<i>-sissedar</i> “stands”
<i>ad-éichidher</i> “detests”	< <i>éitig</i> “repulsive”	<i>ad-ágathar</i> “fears”
<i>in-tuigethar</i> “covers”	< <i>étach</i> “clothing”	<i>-thuichedar</i> “desires, gives thanks”
		<i>-cuirethar</i> “places”
<u>unclear</u>		<i>do-meiccethar</i> “despises”
<i>ad-gládathar</i> “addresses”		<i>con-dírgedar</i> “reproves”
<i>at-muilniur</i> “I say it again” (Wb. hapax)		<i>seichithir</i> “follows”
<i>molaitir</i> “praises”		<i>do-futharcair</i> “desires”
		<i>do-fuisledar</i> “stumbles”

	Active	Deponent
Würzburg	3	62
Milan	5	159

Table 5: deverbal deponent verbs in Wb. and MI.; p = 0.6909

	Active	Deponent
Würzburg	5	29
Milan	11	26

Table 6: non-*aig*-denominal deponent verbs in Wb. and MI.; p = 0.1618

	Active	Deponent
Würzburg	6	43
Milan	50	168

Table 7: *-aig*-verbs in Wb. and MI.; p = 0.1204

- no individual category significant<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I have ignored the category “unclear”, since it makes little sense to compare things that may not be comparable. At any rate, as Table α shows, the data add nothing to the analysis.

	Active	Deponent
Würzburg	1	5
Milan	3	10

Table α: “unclear” verbs in Wb. and MI.; p = 1

- can look at denominals as a whole: *-aig-*verbs also denominal

	Active	Deponent
Würzburg	11	72
Milan	61	194

Table 8: denominal deponent verbs in Wb. and Ml.; p = 0.04463

- Wb. and Ml. significantly different for denominals
  - Strachan's division of *-aig-* and non-*-aig-*verbs not the most informative<sup>3</sup>
- better division of deponent verbs is denominal vs. deverbal
  - denominal category has two sub-groups: *-aig-*verbs and non-*-aig-*verbs

Final observations: comparison of categories within gloss collections

- for Wb., no statistical differences among the various deponent groups
  - deverbals, *-aig-*verbs and other denominals not statistically differentiated
- for Ml., the deverbals very highly differentiated denominals as a whole (more so than for either *-aig-*verbs or other denominals individually)

### 3. Interpretation.

**Facts:** • all deponent verbs in Würzburg are similarly deponent in inflection  
 • in Milan, the denominals more active while the deverbals more deponent

**Inference:** Würzburg Glosses copied not long after whatever caused deponent inflection to begin to collapse.

**Speculation:** cause of the collapse was the loss of semantic content for the middle endings and the loss of an active / deponent opposition for verbs.

ASIDE: For the deverbal verbs, which reflect in part the old Indo-European deponent verbs, the loss of an oppositional middle changed nothing, since these verbs had never had the option of active endings. For other verbs, like the denominals, either the active or deponent ending set had to be generalized. The *-aig-*verbs generalized the middle endings, while *ā*-verb denominals sometimes became active (*móraid*, *móra* "magnifies") and sometimes middle (*comalnaithir*, *comalnathar* "fulfills").

**Question:** why did the denominals undergo significantly more activation?

**Possible solution:** strong verb vs. weak verb is not the answer (see also fn. 3), but it holds promise as a start.

*The f-future:* very likely served as a locus for the introduction of the active endings.

- frequent syncretism (involving 3sg. and 3pl. active and passive, key members of paradigm) requires resolution
- active (i.e. non-deponent) inflection introduced to avoid confusion

<sup>3</sup> Though I do not have time to discuss it here, other possible divisions like strong verb vs. weak verb or strong form vs. weak form (relevant for strong verbs with some weak forms, e.g. *moinethar*, fut. *moinfethar*) are statistically less revealing than the division deverbal vs. denominal verb. Therefore, I assume that the latter is the best division of the verbs.

- active inflection spread from futures to other tenses and moods

NOTE: The *f*-future also occurs in the deverbal formations, but there, unlike for the *-aig-*verbs, the deponent can at least sometimes be differentiated from the passive (cf. 3pl. *du-roimnibetar* Ml. 77<sup>a</sup>12, 3pl. pass. *di-romnaibter* LL 188<sup>a</sup>41). In addition, analogical pressure from other deverbals with *s-* or reduplicated futures may have helped preserve the deponency of the class.

*The ā-subjunctive:* unclear whether the subjunctive functioned similarly to the future w.r.t. the loss of deponent endings.

- *ā*-subjunctive of *ī*-verbs was originally *\*-īā-* (for class W2a in McCone's 1997 system, i.e. non-causative *ī*-verbs)
- *\*-īā-* should behave in parallel to the *f*-futures in *\*-ī<sup>h</sup>ā-* ("*f*" = whatever led to Old Irish *-f-*, since the question is not settled)
- problems:
  - for deponents, *ā*-subjunctives not as thoroughly active as the *f*-futures
  - *\*-īā-* may have been replaced by *\*-ī-* in Pre-Irish
- It is possible, though far from sure, that active endings also spread from the subjunctive.

*Absolute flexion and active endings:* Active forms are predominantly absolute.<sup>4</sup>

- GOI 365 (§569) notes that active forms outnumber deponent forms in absolute flexion.
- interesting observation, but not true
- disproportionate representation of absolute forms does need explanation
  - denominatives most likely to have active endings
  - denominatives mostly simplex verbs (rarely with preverbs)
  - still cannot explain away the high number of active absolute forms: even within the simplex verbs, the tendency is for active forms to be absolute
- absolute forms start becoming marginalized within Old Irish (note eventual replacement by forms resembling the conjunct / deuterotonic verb form)
- marginalized categories more susceptible to replacement
- note also that the absolute endings on the whole more similar to the deponent ones: simple removal of *-(V)r* gives active ending<sup>5</sup>
- common active endings used for deponents are those that are identical outside the presence of *-(V)r*: 3sg. absolute *-(f)id* for *-(f)idir*, 3pl. absolute *-(s/f)it* for *-(s/f)itir*, as well as 3pl. conjunct *-(s/f)et* *-(s/f)etar*.

### 4. Summary.

The first part of this talk was dedicated to showing that the use of active endings increased significantly between Würzburg and Milan, confirming Strachan's 1893 conclusion. What Strachan did not notice is that the increase in active endings was found only in denominal verbs. While we cannot, in the end, point to a single factor

<sup>4</sup> 43 of 105 active forms are NOT absolute, and this includes 21 perfects, which are by definition conjunct.

<sup>5</sup> This, of course, is simply the reverse of the observation that some deponent endings are simply the absolute active ones plus some element in *-(V)r* (Cowgill 1983: 96; in reference to the 3sg. absolute).

that led to this increasing use of active endings only in the denominals, a number of factors working together appear to have created a hostile environment for the deponent endings:

- deponent endings lost their synchronic function (as middles / intransitives)
- in *f*-futures, the deponent endings very frequently led to a confusion of active and passive that could most easily be remedied with active endings
- the same situation may have obtained in the *ā*-subjunctive
- a number of deponent endings (especially for the absolute) could be converted easily to active endings by dropping *-(V)r*.

The effect of this was that while Würzburg saw a relatively minimal intrusion of active endings into the deponent verbs, presumably due to its composition shortly after the loss of function for the middle, Milan shows a more significant incursion of active endings, which foreshadows the nearly total loss of these endings most likely by sometime in the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Strachan 1893: 551-2).

## Appendix: Supplement to Strachan 1893

Note: Not listed here are forms which Strachan records but which are to be analyzed differently (e.g. *ML* 51<sup>a</sup>11 *agatar*, which is 3pl. impv., not 3pl. pres. subj.). Note further that Strachan's summary of the *-aig*-verbs on pp. 541-544 occasionally misses forms that he himself includes earlier in his full listing of forms and loci. The list below supplements the full listing, not the summary.

*-aig*-verbs

To add to Strachan

*ainimraccagidir*: 3sg. perf. *ML* 62<sup>b</sup>21 *a n-ru-n-ainimraccagestar*

*cairigidir*: 3sg. pres. ind. *ML* 36<sup>a</sup>20 *ní-chairigidar*, 36<sup>a</sup>39 *cairigidir*

*debthaigidir*: 1sg. pres. ind. *ML* 21<sup>a</sup>2 *ní-dephthigim*

*díxnigidir*: 3sg. pres. ind. *ML* 20<sup>a</sup>7 *ní-díxnigedar*, 55<sup>a</sup>9 *nad-ní-dígnigedar* (leg. *-díxnigedar*), 80<sup>a</sup>2 *ní-*

*díxnigedar*, 103<sup>a</sup>24 *dígnigedar* (leg. *díxnigedar*); 3sg. pres. subj. 23<sup>a</sup>1 *nad-ní-díxnigedar*

*écmaitligidir*: 3pl. pres. subj. *ML* 27<sup>a</sup>6 *arna-écmaittigetar* (leg. *écmaitligetar*)

*foilsigidir*: 3sg. pres. ind. *ML* 93<sup>a</sup>6 *foilsigedar*

*in-díxnigedar*: 3sg. pres. ind. *ML* 37<sup>b</sup>17 *in-díxnigedar*

*slánaigidir*: 2sg. impv. *ML* 17<sup>b</sup>15 *slánaigthe*

*sommaigidir*: 3pl. pres. ind. *Wb* 17<sup>a</sup>1, *nondob-sommaigetar*

To remove from Strachan

*fercaigidir*: 2sg. impv. *ML* 20<sup>b</sup>13 *fercaigthe-si* (is 2pl. pres. ind.)

*trebirigidir*: 2sg. impv. *ML* 88<sup>a</sup>10 *trebrigthe* (unclear analysis; may be a past passive participle)

*ad-éitchedar*: 2sg. impv. *ML* 103<sup>a</sup>7a *aditche* (is not an *-aig*-verb)

non-*aig*-verbs

To add to Strachan

*ad-ágathar*: 1sg. pres. ind. *ML* 74<sup>a</sup>4 *ad-n-águr-sa*

*ad-éitche*thar: 3sg. pres. ind. *ML* 50<sup>a</sup>9, 122<sup>b</sup>12, 129<sup>a</sup>10 *ad-éitche*thar; 2sg. impv. *ML* 103<sup>a</sup>7a *aditche*

*ad-gládathar*: 3sg. pres. ind. *ML* 30<sup>a</sup>10 *ad-gládathar*

*comalnaithir*: 3sg. fut. *ML* 46<sup>a</sup>20 *nud-chomalnabadar*

*do-moinethar*: 3sg. pres. subj. *Wb* 13<sup>a</sup>2 *arna-tomnathar*; 3sg. perf. *ML* 24<sup>a</sup>17 *níru-foraithmenair-som*; 3pl.

perf. *ML* 80<sup>b</sup>10 *durú-menatar*, 90<sup>a</sup>6 *nad-tormenatar*, 106<sup>a</sup>11 *ní-tormenatar*

*do-tluchethar*: 3sg. pres. ind. *ML* 30<sup>a</sup>10 *do-tluchethar*

*fo-cíallathar*: 3pl. pres. subj. *Wb* 19<sup>a</sup>15 *nacha-rochlat*; 3sg. fut. *ML* 90<sup>a</sup>15 *fu-chéillfea*; 3pl. fut. *Wb* 30<sup>a</sup>15

*fo-chélfatar*

*for-aithminedar*: 3sg. pres. ind. *ML* 55<sup>a</sup>1 *for-aithminedar*

*imm-ruimdedhar*: 3pl. perf. *ML* 105<sup>a</sup>1 *i-nn-imruimdedar*; 3sg. fut. *ML* 30<sup>a</sup>9 *forna-mmestar-som*; 1pl. fut. *Wb*.

9<sup>a</sup>10 *messimir-ní*

*in-tuigethar*: 3pl. fut. *ML* 12<sup>a</sup>9 *in-tuigfet*

*molaithir*: 3sg. pres. ind. *Wb* 4<sup>a</sup>2 *molid*; 3pl. fut. *ML* 69<sup>b</sup>1 *molfait*

*ro-cluinethar*: 2sg. pres. subj. *ML* 26<sup>b</sup>6 *condam-chloithir*

*ro-laimethar*: 3sg. pres. ind. *Wb* 9<sup>a</sup>3 *ro-laimethar*, *Wb* 15<sup>a</sup>20 *laimir-sní*, 3pl. fut. *ML* 69<sup>b</sup>3 *libmatar* (leg.

*libmatar*)

*in-samlathar*: 2sg. impv. *ML* 56<sup>b</sup>26 *na-intamaltae*

*seichithir*: 3sg. fut. *ML* 89<sup>a</sup>5 *seichfed-som*

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