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Ronan, Patricia ; Schneider, Gerold

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Multi-verbal expressions of ‘giving’ in Old English and Old Irish

Patricia Ronan
Department of English
University of Lausanne
p.ronan@gmx.net

Gerold Schneider
Department of English
Universität Zürich
gschneid@es.uzh.ch

Abstract

In both Modern English and Modern Irish, multi-verb expressions can be found to express verbal concepts that could also be expressed by simple verbs, e.g. *to give an answer* or *to make a suggestion*. Similar collocations are already observable in both early English and early Irish. They are assumed not to have been grammaticalised at the early stages (Traugott 1999), but examples of various inflected verbs are found to be complemented by nominalizations.

The present paper investigates examples containing the expression of giving with Old English *sellan* and Old Irish *do-beir*. We compare the noun complements used in the two languages under investigation and the frequencies of the examples based on data collected from the Toronto Corpus of Old English and from a corpus collected from 120,000 words of Old Irish text.

1. Introduction

The current paper is part of an ongoing larger project to describe multi-word verbal constructions in Early Celtic and Early English. It is well known that the English language has increased the analyticity of its verbal constructions over time (e.g. Hiltunen 1983), and the gradual rise of multi-verb or supportverb constructions has been described in this context (e.g. in Brinton & Akimoto (eds) 1999). With the exception of a preliminary study published by Akimoto & Brinton (1999), there are no larger scale corpus studies of multi-verb constructions in Old English. Even though the possibility of Celtic, and in particular Early Welsh language, influence on the development of verbal periphrasis in general, and *do*-periphrasis in particular, has been discussed (e.g. Poussa 1990, Klemola 2002, Filppula, Klemola & Paulasto 2008), no work previous corpus work has been done on multi-verbal in early Celtic languages. The present authors hold corpus studies of all the languages in question to be a necessity for the assessment of the languages in question and this research paper on multi-word verbs from the semantic fields of ‘giving’ intends to provide a first step in this direction. The investigation centres on the early attested periods, between the 8th and 10th centuries. The languages under investigation are Early English, and, as comprehensive Early Welsh attestations only date from about the 12th century onwards, Early Irish.

The core of the word-field of words of giving in Old English is made up by the expressions *sellan* ('give', 'give in exchange' and 'give against remuneration'), *beran* 'bear to(wards)' and *gifan* ('give').

Historically, *beran* has cognates as an expression indicating 'to bear towards' in other language groups, e.g. Latin *ferre* 'bring' and Old Irish *berid* 'to bear'. It can therefore be inferred that Old English *beran*, Old Irish *berid* were in use at early stages of the language and expressed the concept of handing over of an entity. However, in Old English the use of *beran* is restricted mainly to senses equivalent to Present Day English 'to bear', and *sellan* expressed the concept of 'handing over of an entity'. Furthermore, the word *giefan* 'give' was used in similar contexts, but it is attested considerably less frequently than *sellan* in the corpus material investigated. Where *giefan* is used, it is found mostly together with *sellan*, as illustrated by the following example:

- (1) & him Bryttas sealdan & **geafan** eardungstowe
'... the British give and hand him a dwelling place' (B1 [0178 (12.50.29)])

According to Bosworth and Toller (s.v. *sellan*), the Old English *sellan* is attested with the following nomina agentis and nomina actionis: *gifu* 'gift', *gafol* 'tax, due', *leoht* 'light', *treow* 'truth', *wær* 'covenant', *gebod* 'commandment', *andswar* 'answer', *að* 'oath', *geþafung* 'permission', *leaf* 'permission, leave', *forgifnyss* 'forgiveness', *sibb* 'peace', *ræst* 'rest', *sige* 'victory', *ár* 'honour', *fultum* 'help' and *mildheortness* 'mercy'. This indicates a wide variety of possible verbal object nouns. The following study tests on a sample corpus of 100,000 words of Old English prose whether these constructions can be considered frequent overall, and which collocations appear most frequently in the corpus. These data are then compared to data from the same word field in Old Irish, i.e. the verbs *berid* 'to bear' and *do-beir* 'to give', likewise collected from a sample corpus of 100,000 words. The aim of the study is to show how the frequencies of multi word verbs containing inflected verbs that express 'give' compare in the two languages, which semantic fields they centre on, and to assess whether the presence of a related simplex plays a role in their use.

2. Previous research

Collocations of semantically low-content, inflected verbs and predicate nouns are structures that have been observed and described in various languages. Often these collocations are paralleled by morphologically related simple verbs, such as e.g. *to give something a thought* versus *to think about something*. The terminology that is used by authors working in this field includes *expanded predicate* (Algeo 1995), *complex verb* (Brinton 1996), *light verb constructions* (various authors, going back to Jespersen 1909-49, IV: 117), *Funktionsverbgefüge* (van Pottelberge 2002, Balles 2003), *verbonominale Konstruktion* (van Pottelberge 1996), or *support verb construction* (Oyharçabal 2004, Langer 2009).

While many scholars confine themselves to structures that are paralleled by simple verbs, others include structures that do not have parallel simplexes in their research (e.g. Claridge 2000, Balles 2003). There is overall agreement on these collocations being analyticising as the semantic content can be separated from the inflected verb. It is pointed out by a number of authors (e.g. Jacobi 1903, Brinton 1996) that the use of these structures is a sign of elevated stylistic levels, and Jacobi

(1903) stresses the possibility to use verbal collocations to specify verbal aspect in particular. Other authors working from an early Indo-Iranian perspective, stress the function to create new verbal concepts (Balles 2003, Scarlatta 1999, Tristram 2002). It has also been observed (Hiltunen 1983, van Pottelberge 1996) that the early loss of prefixation to specify *aktionsart* has contributed to the rise of verbal periphrasis in the linguistic development of Germanic languages.

That early English contains examples of the expression of one verbal concept by more than one verb is a well known fact. Prominent descriptions of collocations of certain verbs with nouns are given in Visser (1963) and Hiltunen (1983), Denison (1981) has investigated multi-word verbs with an emphasis on the *Ormulum*. A comprehensive corpus based investigation of support verb constructions in Old English has been carried out by Akimoto & Brinton (1999). The authors restrict their study to those verbs that correspond to the most frequently used verbs in Modern English, namely *do*, *give*, *have*, *make* and *take* (1999: 23). The predicate nouns investigated are those which had a corresponding simple verb in Old English (Akimoto & Brinton, *ibid.*). This approach has the result that cases without an equivalent simple verb are excluded. While type frequency, i.e. the number of different collocational types, is indicated in the study, token frequency, i.e. the overall number of examples, is not mentioned.

Multi-word verbs are also found in modern Irish and first investigations have been carried out (Tristram 2002, Bloch-Trojnar 2008). First results from the ongoing investigation of the Old Irish data have recently become available. (Ronan 2007, Ronan 2009, Ronan *fc.* a, b).

3. Methodology

The data has been extracted from Early English and Early Irish texts of more than 100,000 words each. The composition of the texts is shown in the following table:

Old English text	Name	Size
	Bede	80,000
	Beowulf & Judith	12,000
	Orosius	2,000
	Anglo-Saxon Chron. A	15,000
Old English total		109,000
Old Irish text	Würzburg Glosses (Wb)	21,000
	Milan Glosses (MI)	33,000
	St. Gall Glosses (Sg)	11,000
	Thesaurus II (Thes II)	10,000
	Bethu Brigte (BB)	6,000
	Táin Bó Fraech (TBF)	5,000
	Immram Brain (IB)	4,500
	Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó (SMMD)	3,000
	Compert Con Culainn (CCC)	1,000
	Táin Bó Cuailgne	40,000
Old Irish total		134,500

Table 1: The Old English and Old Irish text corpus

Data have been extracted in a semi-automatic search: from the Old English corpus material, all possible variants of the stem forms attested in the dictionary were searched for, i.e. *sel*, *sil*, *syl*, *sal*, *seal*, and *sæl* for *sellan*, *ber*, *beor*, *bir*, *byr*, *bær*, and

bor for *beran*, and *gif, gyf, gief, geof, giof, geaf, gaef, gaf*, and *gef* for *giefan*. All these were also searched for with the prefix *ge-*.

Data from those Old Irish texts that are not available electronically, i.e. all texts except for *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, have been extracted manually. Data from *Táin Bó Cuailgne* are available electronically and have likewise been searched semi-automatically. The Old Irish paradigms are considerably more complex than their Old English counterparts as, in addition to suppletive paradigms in the preterite, initial mutations and the systematic loss of every second, non-final syllable need to be taken into account. Thus the basic stem forms searched for were *beir, ber, bir, bre, ucc* and *rucc* for *berid* and *do-beir, tab, taib, do-ucc* and *tuc* for *do-beir*, and all possible stem form variations cited by the online version of the *Dictionary of the Irish Language*.

The advantages of the semi-automatic method are almost complete recall. Precision is, however, very low and extensive manual filtering of false positives, such as concrete objects, took place, e.g.

(2) *dobeir* *a* *chend* & *a* *muicc* *laiss*
 take.3sg.pres. his head & his pig with.3sg.m
 ‘He takes his head and his pig with him.’ (LU 4950)

(3) *Beir* *síst* *lim*
 carry.imp while with.1sg
 ‘Carry (it) a while with me!’ (LU 4935)

Further, derived verbal forms had to be filtered out, e.g. forms of *as-beir* ‘say’, as in

(4) *Asbeir* *Conchobar* *fri* *Coin Culaind*
 say.3sg.pres. PN against PN.acc.
 ‘Conchobar said to Cú Chulainn’ (LU 4995)

Further more, a number of coincidentally similar graphemes had to be filtered:

(5) *Bertaighth-us* *for* *lár* *in* *taige*
 shake.3sg.-suff.pron 3pl on floor of the house.gen
 ‘He shakes them on the floor of the house.’ (LU 5044-45)

4. Results

4.1 Counts and frequencies

Overall, a considerably larger number of examples of support verb constructions with verbs of giving has been found in Old Irish than in Old English. The following counts have been obtained for the Old English and Old Irish data investigated:

Language	WORDS <i>giving</i>	Instances	Corpus size	F(100,000)
OIr	Do-beir	167	134,500	124.2
OIr	Berid	15	134,500	11.2
OIr	Total	182	134,500	135.3
OE	Sellan	41	109,000	37.7
OE	Beran	7	109,000	6.4
OE	Giefan	2	109,000	1.8
OE	Total	50	109,000	45.9

Table 2: counts of support verb collocations with verbs of giving in Old English and Old Irish

Collocations with the Old Irish *do-beir* ‘gives’ clearly dominate in the OIr expressions of ‘giving’, collocations with the Old English *sellan* dominate in Old English expressions of ‘giving’. Further, the differences between the Old Irish and Old English frequencies are highly significant (according to *chi*-square significance testing). We have explicitly included all words of the semantic class in order to minimise the risk of skewing the data by missing out possible expressions of ‘giving’.

4.2 Verbal Object Nouns

We encountered a sparse data problem for the object nouns. On the other hand, comparison with some of the most highly frequent support verb constructions in Present Day English makes it clear that even the prominent examples given below are no rarer in PDE than some of the Old English and Old Irish examples found.

Construction	f(ICE-GB)	f(100,000 words)
Take place	101	10
Give way	20	2
Have look	20	2
Take advantage	16	1.6
Give answer	6	0.6
Make suggestion	6	0.6
Do business	5	0.5
Have drink	3	0.3

Table 3: Frequencies of Support Verb Constructions in PDE

The above table illustrates the frequency of prominent support verb constructions in the English language. Frequencies in ICE-GB range from 10 examples per 100,000 words for the well established *take place* to 0.3 examples for *have a drink*. In the following the frequencies are illustrated for the corpus texts in early Irish.

verb	object	simplex	f(LU)	f(Wb)	f(MI)	f(other)	f(sum= 134000)
Do-beir	dígal `punishment'	yes		12	49		61
Do-beir	fortacht `help'	yes			10		10
Do-beir	fochaide `tribulation'	yes			7		7
Do-beir	teist `testimony'	no		6		1	7
Do-beir	cobais `confession'	yes		1		4	5
Do-beir	forcell `testimony'	yes		3	1	1	5
berid	brith `judgement'	yes		5			5
Do-beir	armiten `honour'	yes		1	3		4
Do-beir	gell `pledge'	yes				4	4
Do-beir	cath `battle'	no	3				3
Do-beir	cobair `help'	yes	2	1			3
Do-beir	comairle `advice'	yes			1	2	3
Do-beir	almsine `alms'	no		1	1		2
Do-beir	bendacht `blessing'	no			1	1	2
berid	buaid `victory'	no	1	1			2
Do-beir	commain `communion'	no				2	2
Do-beir	comram `combat'	yes				2	2
Do-beir	fobairt `immersion'	yes	2				2
Do-beir	ícc `healing'	yes			2		2
Do-beir	maldacht `curse'	no	1			1	2
Do-beir	menmain `opinion'	no	1		1		2
Do-beir	mess `judgement'	yes		1	1		2
Do-beir	onóir `honour'	no				2	2
Do-beir	pian `pain'	yes			2		2
Do-beir	sercc `love'	yes		2			2
Do-beir	srém `snort'	yes	2				2
Do-beir	tinscara `separation'	yes				2	2
Do-beir	tofonn `hunting'	yes	2				2
Total			14	34	79	22	149

Table 4: Frequencies of Support Verb Constructions with 'Giving' in Old Irish

In the above table only collocations with a frequency ($f > 1$) are included. While the majority of the observed frequencies are between 2 and 10 examples per 100,000 words, collocations with *dígal* 'punishment' are particularly frequent, but have been observed only in religious texts. Overall, however, frequencies are comparable to examples of support verb constructions in a Present Day English sample corpus. For comparison, attestations collected from Old English by means of semi-automatic extraction from *The Dictionary of English Corpus* are as follows:

verb	object	simplex	f(Bede)	f(other)	f(sum)
sellan	leafness `leave'	no	6		6
beran	Ansægdness `sarifice'	yes	5		5
sellan	ælmessan `alms'	no	5		5
sellan	wif `wife'	no	4		4
sellan	gifu `gift'	yes	2	1	3
sellan	að `oath'	no	1	1	2
sellan	alysnesse `redemption'	yes	2		2
sellan	bysne `example'	yes	2		2
sellan	deað `death'	no	2		2
sellan	sige `victory'	no	2		2
sellan	sped `success'	yes	2		2
sellan	wysc `choice'	yes	2		2
Total			35	2	37

Table 5: Frequencies of Support Verb Constructions with ‘Giving’ in Old English

Comparison of the Old Irish and Old English data shows that OIr has considerably more multi-verb expressions with *giving* than Old English. The Old Irish data reach frequency levels that are comparable to those also observable in prominent support verb constructions in Present Day English. On a frequency count of examples from this sample corpus alone it seems as if these constructions may have been no less grammaticalised in Old Irish than in PDE. Even the Old English examples from the sample corpus have frequency counts that, though considerably lower than the Old Irish ones, match those of the PDE constructions. As this observation is based on very small sample corpora, consisting of very few sample texts, testing should be done on considerably larger corpora in order to verify or falsify this impression.

4.3 Semantic specification

In a comparison of the semantic fields that are represented by the Old Irish and Old English data we find that in the corpora investigated here the collocations centre on similar semantic fields. Expressions of bestowing religious offerings, victory and defeat are prominent. While this may be due to a bias towards texts with religious or combative content it must be borne in mind that these topics were generally very prominent in early Medieval literature.

In both languages, Old English and Old Irish, constructions with and without parallel simple verbs may be observed in verbal contexts. Where equivalent simplex exist, the collocation may offer semantic or pragmatic specification:

- (6) ... *bæd Ðaet he him geþeaht sealde*
 ... ‘he asked that he give him council’ (Bede 4 [0608 (26.350.16)])

Geþeaht ‘council’ is related to the verb *geþeahtian* ‘to take council’, which is derived from it. In contrast to *geþeahtian*, which is non-agentative, *geþeaht sealde* explicitly changes the argument structure of the verb and expresses agentative action. Similar concepts can be observed in the following example:

- (7) *ða sealdon hi him bysne monige*
 ‘Then they gave him many examples’ (Bede 1[0139 (9.46.8)])

Bysn ‘example’ relates to *bysnian* ‘to set an example’. In contrast to the simple form, *bysne sellan* again expresses agentivity, the same is the case in the example of *geornesse sellan* ‘to apply zeal to’. *Georness* can be related to non-agentive *geornan* ‘to desire’.

- (8) & *ealle geornesse ic sealde to leornienne & to smeagenne halige gewritu.*
 ‘I applied all zeal to learning and investigating the Holy Scripture’ (Bede 5 0587(22.480.28))

This observation does not hold for all the early English examples, however, and these principles are even less obvious in the Irish examples, where agentivity does not appear to play a role. In the best attested examples in the corpus, *do-beir digail* ‘to give punishment’ we may nevertheless observe semantic specification:

- (9) *in tan dober dia in digail do-mmuinetar*
 the time give.3sg. God the punishment believe.3pl.
in dóini is ferc do insin
 the people is anger of-him this
 ‘When God inflicts punishment, the people believe that this is due to his anger’ (Ml 49b7)
- (10) *is di ráith dée dobeir digail fort*
 is for grace of God give.3sg punishment on.2sg
 ‘It is for God that he inflicts punishment upon you.’ (Wb 6a14)

Dígal ‘punishment’ is the verbal noun to *do-fích* ‘punish, avenge’. The examples of *do-beir dígal* are used in religious contexts, particularly referring to God. In these cases we seem to be dealing with a semantic specialisation of the collocation: whereas the simplex is typically used with human agents in saga literature, the collocation with *do-beir* in the corpus predominantly refer to divine agency or causation.

In both languages, there are also examples, however, which do not have equivalent simplex verbs. Examples can be observed in the following:

- (11) & *Scottas him aðas sealdan, ðæt hie woldan eal ðæt he wolde*
 ‘... and the Irish gave him oaths that they wanted all that he wanted’ (Chron A [0585 (946.3)])
- (12) *Raga, ar Brigit, ... co tarda bennacht form*
 go.fut.1sg. quoth PN so that give.pres.subj.3sg blessing on.1sg.
 ‘I will go, said Brigit, ... so that he may bless me.’ (Bethu Brigte 434)

In the Old English corpus the expression *sellan ælmesse* ‘to give alms’ is the most frequent example of this. Also the idea of (to give away in) marriage, though certainly much less of a cultural innovation, is expressed in a similar fashion, namely by *sellan wif* ‘give to wife’. Particularly in Irish, this strategy can be observed in expressions relating to new cultural concepts, such as Christianity.

The following case seems to occupy a special position:

- (13) ... *Ebrinus se ealdormon him spede & leafnesse sealde to ferenne*
 ‘The alderman Ebrinus gave him means and leave to travel’ (B4 [0026 (1.256.9)])

Leafnesse in example (10) above is not a verbal noun form, but has been formed with the noun-forming suffix *-ness* from *leaf* ‘allow’. The nominalization of *leaf* can also be used as the predicate of verbs, as in *leáfe hæfde* ‘to be allowed, to have leave’. While the use of *leáfe sellan* ‘to give leave’ would have been conceivable on the base

of *leáfe hæfde*, this is not used. At present we have no answer as to why this should be the case.

The status of those constructions without a simple verbal equivalent is noteworthy, however. Though both languages have examples of support verb constructions for which no simplex exists, their frequencies are quite different, however. In Old English those without simplex equivalent are more prominent than in Old Irish as illustrated in the following charts:

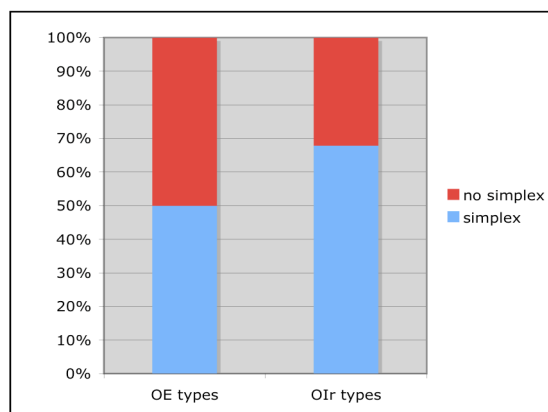


Figure 1: Type frequencies

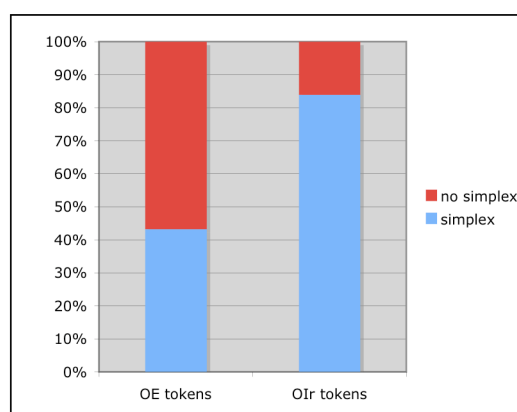


Figure 2: Token frequencies

The charts show that in Old English ($f > 1$) 50% of the types (6 of the 12 types) and in Old Irish ($f > 1$) 68% of the types (19 of the 28 types) have an equivalent simplex. Thus, while the Old English data shows no preferences for predicate nouns that have equivalent simplex, the Old Irish data shows a notable preference for predicate nouns that are related to simple verbs. This trend becomes even clearer where token frequency is concerned.

In 43% of the Old English tokens (16 of the total of 37 tokens) there is an equivalent simplex related to the predicate noun, 57% of the tokens do not have a parallel simplex and they are arguably employed to create Old English verbal expressions. The situation is even clearer in Old Irish, where 84% of the total tokens (125 of 149 tokens) have an equivalent simplex and only 16% have no parallel simplex. The Old Irish tokens therefore clearly indicate that collocations of inflected verbs denoting ‘giving’ and predicate noun centre not so much on creating new verbal phrases, but on offering alternative means of expressing verbal concepts. These alternative expressions may in some cases serve to offer semantic specification of the verbal concept in question. Alternatively, the possibility to influence word order may play a role: due to its strict VSO structure, Irish does not typically allow the verb to be assigned rhematic function in the sentence. Where support verb structures are used, the predicate noun can become the object of the sentence and the rheme of the expression.

5. Conclusions

From the above the following preliminary conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, significantly more multi-word expressions of *giving* have been found in OIr than in OE, and frequencies are as high as those observed for prominent examples of support verb constructions in a Present Day English sample corpus.

While the even higher frequency in Old Irish than in Old English may be an indication of overall higher analyticity of OIr than of OE, this may also be due to the rigid VSO sentence structure in OIr, in which the use of multi-word verbs offer more syntactic flexibility.

Even though a tendency could be observed in both languages to use multi word collocations with ‘giving’ in order to express (new cultural) concepts for which a simplex does not exist, the presence of simplex equivalent did not have a unified influence on frequency: In the early English types of examples with and without a parallel simplex found in the corpus are similar in frequency, there are more tokens of collocations that are not paralleled by a simplex than there are tokens of collocations that have a parallel simplex. This is not the case for Irish, where examples of types, and particularly tokens, without a parallel simplex are a clear minority. As a choice between the use of a simplex and the periphrastic, support verb construction exists in these cases, the use seems to be conditioned by pragmatic considerations. In addition, cases of semantic specification, such as specification of agentivity have been suggested. Thus, the influence of semantic specification observed for example for Sanskrit by Jacobi (1903) also seems to play a role in the investigated collocations in the languages in question here. However, as yet these suggestions are mainly based on the collocation with one semantic group of inflected verbs, ‘giving’, and are in need of further investigation study of collocations with further support verbs.

6. Abbreviations

B	Bede	diPaolo Healy (2004)
BB	Bethu Brigte	Ó hAodha (1978)
CCC	Compert ConCulainn	van Hamel (1933)
CG	Críth Gablach	Binchy (1949)
EC	Echtrae Connlai	McCone (2000)
IB	Immram Brain	Meyer (1895)
LU	Lebor na hUidre	Best & Bergin (1929)
MI	Milan Glosses	Stokes & Strachan (1901)
Sg	St. Gall Glosses	Stokes & Strachan (1903)
SMMD	Scéla Mucce Mac Dathó	Thurneysen (1935)
TBF	Táin Bó Fraech	Meid (1967)
Thes II	Thesaurus II	Stokes & Strachan (1903)
Tur.	Turin Glosses	Stokes & Strachan (1901)
Wb	Würzburg Glosses	Stokes & Strachan (1901)

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