

MICROVARIATION AND V-MOVEMENT: IRISH VS. SCOTS GAELIC

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0. The goal of this paper is to explore the empirical consequences of a specific definition of **microvariation** that involves the relationship of two or more closely related languages and their common ancestor with respect to a certain parameter. Our inquiry will focus on the differences between **Irish** and **Scots Gaelic** in the domain of **V-movement**.

1. To clarify the theoretical issue, consider a situation involving these two conditions:

(A) In the previous stage, there was an instance of structure-dependent variation w. r. t. a certain parameter.

(B) At some point, the varying setting of the relevant parameter ceases to be learnable *due to the loss of certain concomitant properties in the common ancestor*.

Under these conditions, microvariation among the daughter languages may arise as the result of **polarization** of the different options available in the previous stage.

Interestingly enough, *these polarized results involve new clusters of properties that are a blend of **archaic** and **innovatory** features* in the daughter languages, so that none of them can be considered to preserve the old state of affairs.

2. As mentioned above, much of the substance for our discussion will be provided by the analysis of V-movement in Irish and Scots Gaelic. In a nutshell, their remote common ancestor – **Old Irish** – displayed variation in the landing site of V-movement: **V-to-C** *in the case of verb initial matrix affirmative clauses*, vs. **V-to-Agr** *elsewhere* (see Carnie, Pyatt and Harley (94) for this proposal). At some point during the Middle Irish, just before the dialectal split, this distinction ceased to be learnable due to drastic changes in the structure of the verbal complex that included (i) the loss of **pronominal infixation** and (ii) the loss of systematic distinction between **prototonic** and **deuterotonic** compound verbal forms.

As a result of these changes, the fine-grained distinctions involving left peripheral landing sites in a V1 language ceased to be learnable and Irish and Scots Gaelic took different paths via polarization: **V-to-C in Scots Gaelic** vs. **V-to-Agr in Irish**. This led eventually to the development of a number of systematic differences in both languages.

3. We examine now some of these differences, the blend of archaic and innovatory features referred to above:

I- Present and Future Tense. Irish is archaic in maintaining the old future and having a synthetic present plus a progressive periphrasis. Scots Gaelic innovated in losing the old future, the old present having mostly a future meaning and the periphrasis is an unmarked present (see Ramchand(97) for a detailed analysis).

II- Personal Inflection. Again, Irish is closer to the old situation with a number of person distinctions that are absent in Scots Gaelic except for some imperative and conditional forms.

III-Independent vs. Dependent forms. Scots Gaelic is surprisingly archaic in preserving the old independent vs. dependent distinction, so that independent **cuiridh mi** “I shall put” contrasts with dependent negative **cha chuir mi** “I shall not put”. This is a remnant of the Old Irish absolute vs. conjunct inflection that extended to most tenses and person ending.

Irish, as well as Scots Gaelic maintains a small number of special dependent forms but the regular opposition **-idh/-** is completely absent.

IV-Indicative vs. Subjunctive. In Irish, one finds a clear contrast between indicative **cuireann sé** “he puts” and subjunctive **cuire sé**. This is an innovation that emerged via analogical proportion from present stems that carried a nasal suffix only in the indicative. Scots Gaelic lacks this systematic contrast.

4. As sketched in 2, these differences can be explained in terms of a single parameter:
V-to-Agr in Irish vs. V-to-C in Scots Gaelic.

I- As for the future reading of the old present in Scots Gaelic, I will assume that futures convey a modal interpretation directly achieved via V-to-C.

II- The lack of person inflection in Scots Gaelic follows from the assumption that person marking is the result of pronoun incorporation and that it takes place under strict syntactic adjacency. V-to-C places the V too high for Ds to be incorporated.

III- As for the dependent/independent contrast, I will assume that the **-idh** ending is the spelling out of the [+decl.], [+aff.] features in C, the position to which Vs are moved.

IV- The indicative vs. subjunctive contrast requires a certain subtlety: **-eann** marking of ind. is needed when V stays in Agr, so that its absence marks subj. that is checked at LF via V-to-C. When V moves overtly to C as in Scots Gaelic, the subj. feature is checked there anyway and no special ind/subj. distinction is needed.

5. If this account is roughly correct, Old Irish seems to pose a problem, for it had *both* strong person inflection *and* systematic independent/dependent distinctions and so on. If we assume that independent inflection is due to V-to-C, person distinctions should be incompatible with it.

The crucial factor is that in *Old Irish person inflection was not due to incorporation*. Learners had independent evidence in favor of a strong value for agr. features; namely, the strategy of pronominal infixation. We can interpret infixed pronouns as object agreement, provided that “clitic doubling” with lexical arguments was possible. *Once pronominal infixation was lost, the easiest way for the learners to interpret person marking in a V1 language is via pronoun incorporation (=Irish), otherwise the verbal system becomes completely analytical (=Scots Gaelic).*

6. This analysis makes a number of interesting predictions. Consider negative clauses in the past tense. This tense is marked in both languages by the leniting preverb **do-**, as in **(do)chuir sé** “he put”.

Its negative counterpart is entirely regular in Scots Gaelic: **cha (do) chuir sé** “he didn’t put”. Irish however shows a special form: **níor chuir** “id.”, with no trace of **do-** and the presence of a **-r** in its place, derived from Old Irish perfective **ro-**.

I interpret this fact as an indication of the existence of *an independent T-to-C chain in Irish opposed to the “regular” V-to-T plus the raising of the complex head to C in Scots Gaelic.*

7. A further prediction is that the **placement of sentential adverbs** before the complementizer should be ruled out in Scots Gaelic as opposed to the situation in Irish where it is possible via some version of Comp-lowering. At this point of our research, this is an open question.