

On Grammaticalisation of Periphrastic Tense and Aspect Constructions in Irish and Welsh

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The present paper proposes to investigate periphrastic progressives, perfects and futures in the Irish language. The guiding research question was how periphrastic tense and aspect constructions grammaticalised in the Irish language, and secondly, whether the same development can be found in a closely related language, Welsh. The approach employed in this paper is largely empirical. The data has been manually extracted from written corpora of Old- and Middle Irish texts, consisting of about 120,000 and 130,000 words respectively, as well as from a Middle Welsh sample corpus consisting of about 42,000 words. The material will be discussed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

The Celtic languages Irish and Welsh have a morphological division between habitual and punctual verbal aspect. Both modern languages have also developed periphrastic progressive constructions consisting of the verb 'BE', a spatial preposition 'at' and a verbal noun, the Celtic equivalent to the infinitive in other languages, e.g.:

- (1) Modern Irish: *Tá mé ag canadh.*
Be.PRES. I at singing. VERBAL NOUN (VN).
- (2) Modern Welsh: *Dw i yn canu.*
Be.PRES. I at singing.VN.
'I am singing.'

In addition periphrastic perfects have been created with the help of the verb 'BE', a preposition meaning 'after' and the verbal noun, e.g.:

- (3) Modern Irish: *Tá mé tréis canadh.*
Be.PRES I after singing.VN
- (5) Modern Welsh: *Dw i wedi canu.*
Be.PRES. I after singing.VN
'I have sung' [Lit.: I am after singing].

The grammaticalisation of spatial prepositions to tense and aspect markers is a well-known phenomenon (cf. e.g. Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca 1994) and can also be observed in Irish and Welsh. Interestingly, both these languages seem to have grammaticalised progressive periphrasis at first, and then seem to have extended periphrasis towards expression of perfect aspect. Grammaticalisation of periphrastic prepositional constructions to mark future tense is most recent, and seemingly still going on.

This paper proposes to track the development of periphrastic progressives and perfects in Irish and Welsh. It will be shown that periphrastic constructions evolved first in the progressive, derived from spatial constructions. At earlier stages of both languages, temporal adverbial phrases were used to modify main clause before they are found with the respective verbs 'BE'. It will be argued that periphrastic perfects evolved secondarily, based on the model of progressive structures. This observation seems to hold for both Irish and Welsh, and it will be argued that the similarity in development of the two languages is due to drift as defined by Heine and Kuteva (2005).

References

- Bybee, J., R. Perkins & W. Pagliuca. 1994. *The Evolution of Grammar. Tense, Aspect and Modality in the Languages of the World*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Heine, B. & T. Kuteva. 2005. *Language Contact and Grammatical Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.