

## The Diachrony of Person-Number Marking of Subjects in Celtic

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The system of marking person and number of verbal subjects in the Celtic languages has undergone considerable changes in the history of the language family. The earliest examples of the family – the continental Celtic languages of antiquity (Jordán Cólera 2019; Lambert 2003) and the early stages of Irish (Thurneysen 1998), Welsh (Evans 1964), Breton (Lewis and Piette 1990), and Cornish (Lewis 1990) from the medieval period – attest richly inflected verbal systems, with distinct verbal morphology for almost all persons and numbers. Alongside this, they attest null subjects: a non-NP subject of a verb is unexpressed in unmarked contexts.

This contrasts markedly with the situation found in later stages of the Celtic languages. Through the Middle Irish and into the Early Modern Irish period, both the verbal and the nominal morphology of the language becomes increasingly impoverished, and subject pronouns, which were already obligatory with the copula and the defective verb *ol* ‘says’ in later Old Irish, become required in ever more contexts. This development has traditionally been described as occurring first with verbs in the passive voice, with subject pronouns then spreading to be required in most contexts that had previously required a null subject. In modern standard Irish, most persons are expressed by the combination of an uninflected verbal form and a personal pronoun, while there remain inflected forms for some persons in some tenses, which require a null subject, e.g., *léim* ‘I read’ vs. *léann sé* ‘he reads’. Inflected forms are distributed to different persons of the verb in different tenses, and the amount of inflection preserved varies between dialects of the modern language. There are, however, questions to be answered as to the precise details of how the development takes place, and how the various types of pronouns and pronominal particles in the language participate in and are affected by the change from null subjects to overt pronominal subjects.

The developments undergone by Welsh are somewhat more complex than those found in Irish. While very little verbal morphology was lost over the history of the language – modern spoken Welsh retains distinctive personal endings for almost all persons of the verb, with syncretism being limited to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> persons plural in the preterite and conditional – there has been considerable change regarding the null subject parameter in the language. In Middle Welsh an alternation can be observed between pronominal subjects in preverbal position, which must always be overt, and those in postverbal position, which may be either overt or null. Over the course of the development from Middle Welsh to modern spoken Welsh, this flexibility has been lost: subjects can only be post-verbal, and must always be overt, e.g., *gweles i* ‘I saw’, *gweloch chi* ‘you (pl.) saw’. Moreover, Welsh exhibits other interesting agreement properties, such as plural NPs triggering singular agreement on verbs, e.g., *gwelodd y plant* ‘the children saw (sg.)’ vs. *gwelon nhw* ‘they saw (pl.)’.

In this paper, we will use two newly developed historical corpora to examine the factors involved in the loss of null subjects in both Irish and Welsh. We will examine the extent to which Information Structure (IS) factors influence this development in both languages, as opposed to the development being purely morphosyntactic. For instance, it seems plausible that overt subject pronouns in Middle Welsh are more frequent in new-subject and/or topic-switch contexts. Do overt subjects spread from these environments to less IS-marked contexts? It is not clear that there is any correlation with verbal morphology. On the other hand, in Irish, it is far less clear that IS-factors play any role, and a correlation with morphological richness seems to be more evident. We will test these hypotheses against data from a selection of medieval and early modern texts from the two languages.

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