Gender in Irish between continuity and change

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Abstract

If grammatical gender is a puzzle, Irish is a many-pieced jigsaw: an obsolescent language, Irish has been spoken for centuries in a situation of contact with English by an ever-shrinking community of bilingual speakers—which has long lost all its monoglot members. In structural terms, the Irish gender system appears to be undergoing a two-speed simplification process leading to a split-agreement system: traditionally a formal system in Corbett’s (1991) typology, agreement in Irish remains quite conservative within the boundaries of the noun phrase (albeit with a certain degree of phonological simplification), whereas anaphoric agreement now appears to be largely determined by semantic factors (feminine for [+female, +animate] antecedents, masculine for the semantic residue). Contact with English (which is the first language of many speakers and the variety most frequently used, either “actively” or “passively”, by all of them) has been claimed to have an influence on these developments: speaking of a different variety of Gaelic, Dorian (1977, p. 100) had already observed that structures which have a functional counterpart in English seem more resilient than those which do not, a point which Maguire (1991, p. 203) exemplifies with reference to phonology. Nevertheless, the simplification of the Irish system may have parallels in similar developments in the history of English and in present-day vernacular French, with its uncertainties and idiosyncrasies in the formal assignment of inanimate nouns, and thus
be largely due to language-internal reasons, first and foremost the
(pre)-historical weakening and loss of the unstressed word-final syllables, which complicated a much simpler formal assignment system
of Indo-European inheritance. In this talk, I will illustrate some spe-
cific aspects of the Irish situation using examples from a diachronic
corpus of spoken Irish and try to frame the simplification process in
terms of structural convergence (cf. Backus, 2004) in a contact situa-
tion.

References


