The Old Irish double system of verbal inflection: towards a synchronic analysis[*]

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The Old Irish double system of verbal inflection has received some attention within the framework of generative syntax. In this paper I evaluate the existing synchronic accounts and suggest that the problems they encounter are mainly due to the fact that they rely purely on syntactic processes. I propose that the complexities of the Old Irish verbal system can be better understood if the load is distributed between syntax and phonology.

1 THE OLD IRISH VERBAL SYSTEM

In Old Irish there are two types of verb – simple and compound. Simple verbs consist of a verbal stem and an inflectional ending. In every tense (more or less) each simple verb has two distinct inflectional patterns which depend on the verb's position in the sentence. Like its modern counterpart, Old Irish is a verb-initial language, although certain particles can precede the verb. The independent (also called absolute) endings are used when the verb is in absolute initial position in the sentence. The dependent (or conjunct) form is used when the verb is not in absolute initial position, for example when it follows a conjunct particle such as negative *ní*, the interrogative particle *in* or *co* meaning 'so, until'. Below is a paradigm for the simple verb *beir* 'carries'.

(1)

Absolute	**Conjunct**	
biru	-biur	'I carry'
biri	-bir	'You (sg) carry'
berid	-beir	'He/She/It carries'
bermai	-beram	'We carry'
beirthe	-berid	'You (pl) carry'
berait	-berat	'They carry'

(2) a. *berid in lebor* 'he carries the book'
   b. *ní beir in lebor* 'he doesn't carry the book'
   c. *in beir in lebor?* 'does he carry the book?'
   d. *co mbeir in lebor* 'until he carries the book'

Compound verbs consist of a simple verb in the conjunct form, preceded by one or more preverbs. These preverbs are etymologically related to prepositions, and generally still correspond to them in meaning. Preverbs are used to change the meaning of the base verb. For example *do-beir* (to+carry) 'gives, brings', *as-beir* (out+carry) 'says'.

Compound verbs also show the independent/dependent distinction. The dependent form follows the usual Old Irish stress pattern, with the stress on the first syllable, and is called the prototonic. In the independent form the stress falls on the second syllable (after the first preverb) and is therefore called the deuterotonic. The deuterotonic and prototonic forms

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