Nominal predication and the semantics of roots

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Overview

In Scottish Gaelic, an invariant pronoun is found in a biclausal construction involving a span of time and 'since'. I argue that the pronoun is in fact referential, rather than pleonastic. The pronoun refers to the span of time established by the clausal complement of *bho(n)* 'from/since'. The time-span noun in the first clause is able to form a predicate by merging with a null classifier that is only semantically compatible with roots that have an interpretation in the context of [SPAN]. These data have important implications for our understanding of "expletive" pronouns, the interaction of root semantics with functional material, and for theories of nominalization and classifier structure in general.

The problem

While Scottish Gaelic has sometimes been claimed not to have expletive pronouns (McCloskey 1996; cf. Adger 2011), an invariant pronoun appears in the following construction:

(1) Tha e/*i bliadhna bhon a bha thu an seo.
be.PRS 3SM/3SF year(FEM) from/since COMP be.PST you here
'It is (/has been) a year since you were here.'

This appears to be similar to one type of nominal predication in the language, but does not employ the inflected preposition that is required in that construction (seen in 2):

(2) Tha mi *('nam) thidsear.
be.prs I in.1sg teacher
'I am [currently] a teacher.' (Adger & Ramchand 2003:332)

Only nouns that are spans of time or distance such as *bliadhna* 'year', *mìos* 'month', *seachdainn* 'week', *latha* 'day', or *mile* 'mile' appear in this construction, and a 'since' clause must be present:

(3) Tha e seachdainn *(bhon a thachair e).
be.PRS 3SM week(FEM) from/since COMP happen.PST 3SM
'It is a week *(since it happened).'

(4) Tha e deich mìle air fhichead bho Phortrigh gu Gleanndail.
be.PRS 3SM ten mile on twenty from Portree to Glendale
'It is thirty miles from Portree to Glendale.'

Note too that the verb *bi* 'be' (here *tha* 'is/are') appears, and not the "copula" *is*. If this is predication, this fact is surprising because *bi* can usually only appear with non-nominal predicates (individual-level nominals are formed with the copula *is* while stage-level nominals require the preposition seen in (2); see e.g. Adger & Ramchand 2003; Schreiner 2015). If this were equation, we would also expect *is*, as in (4):

(5) 'S e Calum an tidsear.
COP.PRS 3SM Calum the.SM teacher
'Calum is the teacher.' (Adger & Ramchand 2003:349, ex. 43).

The open questions are: (A) What is the nature of the invariant pronoun? (B) What unites the group of nouns that participate in this construction, and how do they interact with the 'since' clause? (C) Why is the verb *bi* involved, instead of *is*?

Proposal

(A) The invariant pronoun is referential, pointing to the time span between the event time set up in the subordinate clause and the utterance time of the matrix clause, or to the distance span set up in the PP. Since this span is not represented overtly, the default (masculine singular) pronoun appears. The length of time or distance is being predicated of this span.

(B) The roots that participate in this construction all contain a lexical (Encyclopedic) interpretation in the context of [SPAN].

(C) Following Roy's (2006/2013) division of the stage-individual distinction into *defining*, *characterizing*, and *situation-descriptive* sentences, this predication is *characterizing*, yielding a non-dense predicate. This type of nominal predicate is otherwise not found in the language. Roy's

definition of a non-dense predicate is one that can hold without requiring evidence of the predicate to be true of all its sub-parts. This is the reading that obtains in this construction.

While the predictions of Roy's (2006/2011) system are largely borne out in Scottish Gaelic, her theory incorrectly predicts grammaticality for a sentence like that in (5). While Roy (and others, e.g. Adger & Ramchand 2003) claim that a bare N/*n* is unable to create a predicate on its own, Roy posits that count nouns in Classifier structure should be able to form predicates.

(6) *[Tha e [$_{ClP}$ [$_{nP}$ dotair.]]]
be.PRS 3SM Ø doctor [Intended: 'He is a doctor.']

Her explanation for the observed ungrammaticality of sentences like that in (5) is that *bi* cannot select for any nominal predicates. I claim that *bi* can in fact form "characterizing" nominal predicates in the case that a ClassP is present. Further, a phonologically null Class head exists that is compatible only with certain nominals. These nominals can merge with the [SPAN] Class head, projecting the structure that will allow a "characterizing" nominal predicate to form.

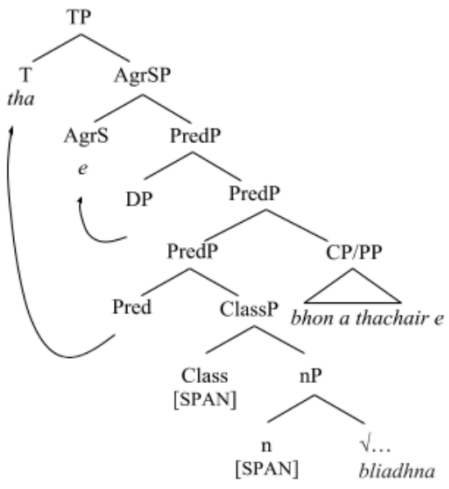
I formalize this account within the Distributed Morphology framework (Halle & Marantz 1993) as follows: We start with a root that has an interpretation in the environment of [SPAN]. This is merged with a [SPAN] nominalizer (light noun, à la Kramer 2018's analysis of plurality in herd nouns). The resulting nominal cannot form a predicate, so merges with a [SPAN] classifier. The (phonologically null) VI that can be inserted here contains the [SPAN] nominal in its context for insertion. The projected ClassP then merges with Pred (instantiated by *tha*). The resulting PredP can then merge with the CP or PP to define the length of the span.

The Encyclopedia entry for *bliadhna* 'year' would be as follows:

(7) √418 ↔ [+time] & […] & time("year") & span("year") / [$n_{[+span]}$[__]√]

This span specification makes the root compatible with the *n* that is in turn compatible with the Class head that is needed to form the nominal predicate.

(8)



Consequences

This analysis supports a modified version of Roy's proposal, and the view that Class can interact with nominal semantics. The data point to NumP and ClP being able to project separately (as in e.g. Roy and Gebhardt (2009), contra Picallo 2006, Alexiadiou et al. 2010) since it has been independently argued that NumP is not being projected when *bi* is involved (Roy 2006/2013, Schreiner 2015). This analysis also supports the idea that acategorial roots (e.g. Borer 2005) still have some semantic content.

References: Adger, D., & G. Ramchand. 2003. Predication and Equation. *LI* 34.3: 325-359. **Alexiadou**, A., Iordăchioaia, G., & Soare, E. 2010. Number/aspect interactions in the syntax of nominalizations: A Distributed approach. *Journal of Linguistics*, *46*(03), 537-574. **Borer**, H. 2005b. Structuring Sense. Volume II: The Normal Course of Events. Oxford UP. **Gebhardt**, L. 2009. *Numeral classifiers and the structure of DP.* **McCloskey**, J. 1996. Subjects and subject positions in Irish. *The syntax of the Celtic languages: A comparative perspective*, 241-283. **Picallo**, M. C. 2006. Some notes on grammatical gender and l-pronouns. In *Proceedings of the workshop "Specificity and the evolution/emergence of nominal determination systems in Romance"* (Vol. 119, pp. 107-121). **Roy**, I. A., 2006. Non-Verbal Predications: A Syntactic Analysis of Predicational Copular Sentences. **Roy**, I. A. 2013. *Non-verbal Predications: Predicational Copular Sentences at the Syntax-Semantics Interface*. Clarendon Press, Oxford. **Schreiner**, S. L.R. (2015). The creation and interpretation of nominal predicates: Bi+ann in Scottish Gaelic. *Lingua* 154, 110-139.