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On the Welsh Verb System

Ian C. Stirk

Introduction

This paper discusses a few aspects of the verb system in the modern Welsh language. Many aspects of it cannot not be covered in a few pages, needless to say. Nothing is said about negation, for one thing, or the formation of yes / no questions, but I do not think that anything in those areas would have an effect on the points made here. The phenomenon of mutation, in which certain initial consonants of words undergo changes according to their syntactic environment or function, does not play a large part in what follows, although *soft mutation* is mentioned a few times. The principal changes of soft mutation are as follows :

$p \rightarrow b, c [k] \rightarrow g, t \rightarrow d, b \rightarrow f [v], d \rightarrow dd [\delta], m \rightarrow f [v]$

There is a wide gap between the literary Welsh language and the various spoken dialects, wider than there is in most languages, including English, but perhaps not as wide as in Arabic. I have indicated literary forms below by the abbreviation (lit). Expressions unmarked by (lit) are, unless otherwise indicated, in the more or less standardised spoken language which is gradually emerging in the country alongside the regional dialects. For more information on this topic, see the introduction to King (1993) and the first chapter of Ball and Müller (1992).

Encouraged in my preoccupation with analogy by Itkonen and Haukioja (1997), I have assumed that an analogical explanation of various Welsh sentence forms is a reasonable one. To take English examples, I imagine that a child's language acquisition follows patterns rather like the following. Suppose the child has learned the regular verb paradigm of “walk walked walked”. In that case, “jump jumped jumped” does not need extra memory space since its paradigm is correctly predicted by analogy. Then the child is faced with “think thought thought”. Well, human beings have large memories, so the odd paradigm can be given a special place in it. Now along comes “sink”. Is this analogous to “walk” or “think”? Neither. “Sink sank sunk” requires more memory space, and new verbs ending in “-ink” are all a bit uncertain. “Drink” follows “sink”, “blink” follows “walk”, and “think” seems to have been a one off. Given analogy and plenty of memory then this is the pattern we should expect : a mosaic of competing analogies, with some working better than others. This kind of pattern emerges in Welsh sentences also.

I want to thank here the students of my Welsh language class for helping me to clarify some tricky points of Welsh grammar, and also the students of my “What languages are like” class for putting up with my analogies.

The regular Welsh affirmative sentence

Welsh is counted among the verb-first (VSO) languages. This is a fairly recent phenomenon in the history of the language, according to Willis (1998). Here are some clear examples of the verb-first nature :

Torrodd y bachgen y ffenestr â charreg (lit)

The boy broke the window with a stone

Cerddais i i'r ysgol ddoe (lit)

I walked to school yesterday

In the spoken language, the verb is often preceded by a particle, most often **mi** in North Wales dialects, or **fe** in the South. This particle generally carries no meaning, but causes soft mutation of the verb. Very often too the particle is omitted, but the mutation remains :

Dorrodd y bachgen y ffenestr â charreg

Gerddes i i'r ysgol ddoe

Also many sentences begin with an auxiliary verb, generally part of **bod**, *be*.
For example :

Rydw i'n cerdded i'r ysgol bob dydd

I walk to school every day (literally, I am walking ..)

Mae'r ferch yn dysgu Saesneg

The girl learns (is learning) English

The tenses which use auxiliary verbs are called periphrastic tenses. The **yn** ('n after vowels) which precedes the verb noun (infinitive) is called the *predicative yn*, and must be present before the predicate in sentences beginning with a form of **bod**. Before verb nouns this causes no mutation, but it does cause soft mutation when preceding other nouns or adjectives :

Mae'r ferch yn fyfyrwr

The girl is a student (unmutated, **myfyrwr**)

Mae'r ferch yn dal

The girl is tall (unmutated, **tal**)

In literary Welsh, there are both inflected and periphrastic tenses, but in the spoken language the number of inflected forms has been reduced, mainly by replacing inflected tenses with periphrastic ones. For instance, the literary language has an inflected pluperfect tense :

Prynasai ef gar newydd cyn i mi ei weld

He had bought a new car before I saw him

The spoken language replaces this with a periphrastic form :

Oedd e wedi prynu car newydd cyn i mi ei weld e

Literally, the periphrasis means *he was after buying a new car ...*

In many spoken dialects, the preterite (simple past) tense remains as the only inflected one. By analogy with the other periphrastic forms, some dialects use a periphrasis for this one also. In addition to

Dales i'r bil

I paid the bill

it is also possible to say

Nes i dalu'r bil

Here **nes** is a form of **gwneud**, *do*. More literally, then, *I did pay the bill*.

I do not think there is actually a dialect containing only periphrastic tenses, but one can easily imagine that such a thing might occur. In that case, the language would be auxiliary-first, rather than verb-first.

Identification sentences

There is one kind of affirmative sentence in Welsh that cannot appear in verb-first form. This is the kind referred to by King (1993) as the “identification sentence”. Here are some examples :

Siân yw'r ferch dalaf yn y dosbarth (lit.)

Siân ydy'r ferch dala yn y dosbarth

Siân is the tallest girl in the class

Mr Jones ydy ein meddyg

Mr Jones is our doctor

Logically these sentences concern the identity of two definite descriptions, that is, they state that two definite descriptions refer to the same object. Definite descriptions are noun phrases that refer to a single entity in the context of an utterance : proper nouns are almost always used in this way, as are expressions like “the tallest girl in the class” (which of course contains the *definite* article). In Welsh such sentences have to be expressed with one of the definite descriptions in first place, followed (in the present tense) by the **yw/ydy** form of **bod**, followed by the

other definite description. Of course the order of the definite descriptions makes no grammatical difference : **Y ferch dala yn y dosbarth ydy Siân** and **Ein meddyg ydy Mr Jones** are equally proper.

In tenses other than the present, the usual third person singular of **bod** is used, with soft mutation if applicable, for example :

Siân oedd y ferch dala yn y dosbarth

Siân was the tallest girl in the class

Mr Jones oedd ein meddyg

Mr Jones was our doctor

Siân fydd y ferch dala yn y dosbarth

Siân will be the tallest girl in the class

Mr Jones fydd ein meddyg

Mr Jones will be our doctor

It is important to stress that there is no way to express such sentences in verb-first form, for this is a point that seems to have been overlooked by many writers on Welsh grammar, as we shall see below.

Interrogative pronouns, such as **pwyl**, *who*, and **beth**, *what*, generally come first in interrogative sentences, so such sentences cannot be verb-first either. **Pwyl** and **beth** are treated analogously to definite descriptions, so we encounter the sentences

Pwy ydy'r ferch dala yn y dosbarth?

Who is the tallest girl in the class?

Pwy ydy ein meddyg?

Who is our doctor?

Beth ydy'r aroglau'na?

What's that smell?

Pwy and **ein meddyg** are taken to refer to the same entity. If the sentences are reversed for emphasis :

Y ferch dala yn y dosbarth ydy pwy?

The tallest girl in the class is who?

Ein meddyg ydy pwy?

Our doctor is who?

the verb is still not initial, so that it is impossible for sentences containing interrogative pronouns to be verb-first.

Emphatic sentences

As in the last two examples, a change of word order can be used for emphasis, and in fact this is more common in Welsh than in English. The emphasised phrase goes into the initial position, and predicative **yn** is omitted. In the following examples, the unemphatic sentence is shown first, followed by the emphatic one. The degree of emphasis is generally too slight to be represented syntactically in the English

translation : stress and intonation usually suffices in that language.

Mae Eluned yn eistedd wrth y ford

Wrth y ford mae Eluned yn eistedd

Eluned is sitting at the table

Mae Gwyn yn palu yn yr ardd

Palu yn yr ardd mae Gwyn

Gwyn is digging in the garden

Oedd y car yn y garej

Yn y garej oedd y car

The car was in the garage

Mae Angharad yn siarad Ffrangeg

Ffrangeg mae Angharad yn siarad

Angharad speaks French

Now consider unemphatic sentences like these :

Mae Alun yn Gymro

Alun is a Welshman

Mae Eluned yn Gymraes

Eluned is a Welshwoman

If we want to emphasise the **Cymro** and **Cymraes** elements, removing the predicative **yn** and the soft mutation that goes with it here, the result will

be **Cymro** __ **Alun** and **Cymraes** __ **Eluned**, with something of the verb **bod** in between. There is a certain analogy with identification sentences here, and in fact the **yw/yny** form is used here also :

Cymro ydy Alun

Cymraes ydy Eluned

Certain grammars and language textbooks (I refrain from naming and shaming here!) lump emphatic sentences like these together with identification sentences. Certainly the syntactic analogy is there, but semantically the analogy is not so striking. At most one could say that there is one particular Welshwoman who is identical to Eluned, and similarly one particular Welshman identical to Alun.

The syntactic analogy carries on also when the predicate is an adjectival phrase, as for instance in

Mae'r gwaith yma'n anodd

Anodd ydy'r gwaith yma

This work is hard

Semantically of course the analogy is even more thin in this case.

Oddly enough, identification sentences and these somewhat analogous emphatic ones receive poor treatment even in the best grammars. Thus King (1993) devotes three sections (§§§ 18, 19, 20) to what he calls “focused” sentences (that is, emphatic ones) and one section to identification sentences (§ 220), but somehow never mentions those like **Cymraes ydy Eluned** or **Anodd ydy'r gwaith yma**. This is a pity, as King (1993) is generally very good about the syntax of the spoken language.

Thorne (1993) has a short section (§ 352) on “mixed” (emphatic) sentences, but does not single out identification sentences at all, as far as I can discover. In fact, sentence structure takes up only a small part of Thorne’s grammar. Most of it is devoted to morphological considerations, as are grammars like Williams (1980). This may well be due to the Latin grammar tradition : Welsh, like Latin, has plenty of morphology to pad out a grammar, leaving only a little room for syntax.

Luckily there is one pedagogical grammar of literary Welsh, Jenkins (1962), which at least gives clear examples of all the different possibilities, although identification sentences are included among emphatic ones. Jenkins does not seem to notice that identification can only be expressed by a sentence which is not verb-first.

There is a further kind of emphatic sentence. Consider the following :

Mae Gwyn yn astudio’n galed am ei arholiad e

Gwyn sy’n astudio’n galed am ei arholiad e

Gwyn is studying hard for his examination

In this case, it is the subject of the sentence that is singled out for emphasis. This requires yet another form of *bod* to be used in the present tense, **sy** (lit **sydd**). In fact this is a form that introduces relative clauses, and could generally be translated into English by the phrases *who (which, that) is (are)*.

This is the only way to emphasise the subject of a sentence which unemphasised begins with a part of **bod**. Here the analogy seems to be with relative clauses : these clauses are situations in which a noun phrase may precede a verb of which it is the subject. The sentences might be regarded as :

Mae Gwyn yn astudio’n galed am ei arholiad e

(Mae) Gwyn sy'n astudio'n galed am ei arholiad e

(It is) Gwyn (who) is studying hard for his examination

with the bracketed forms omitted.

Interrogative pronouns may also be the subject of sentences, and since they are usually sentence initial, they are treated in the same way as emphatic subjects :

Pwy sy wedi agor y drws?

Who has opened the door?

Beth sy yn y boc's'na?

What's in that box?

The relationship between emphatic sentences and relative clauses becomes even more clear in literary Welsh forms such as the following taken from Jenkins (1962), page 190 :

Enillodd fy mrodyr y gwobrau i gyd yn yr eisteddfod (lit)

Fy mrodyr a enillodd y gwobrau i gyd yn yr eisteddfod (lit)

My brothers won all the prizes in the eisteddfod

Daliasant hwy lwynog ac nid dwrgi (lit)

Llwynog a ddaliasant hwy ac nid dwrgi (lit)

They caught a fox and not an otter

Here the relative pronoun **a**, which causes soft mutation, is visible in these emphatic sentences. The relative pronoun generally disappears in spoken Welsh :

Llwynog ddalson nhw ac nid dwrgi

The soft mutation is still visible, however, although it is difficult to tell if this is a remnant of the relative pronoun, since inflected verb forms are almost always soft mutated in the spoken language. Here are more examples of emphasised subjects and objects with verbs other than *bod*, in the spoken language :

Ganodd 'mrawd i yn yr eisteddfod

'Mrawd i ganodd yn yr eisteddfod

My brother sang in the eisteddfod

Weles i fochyn yn y cae

Mochyn weles i yn y cae

I saw a pig in the field

In the second example, the word **mochyn**, *pig*, undergoes soft mutation when it follows an inflected verb as its object, as did **llwynog**, *fox*, in a previous example.

In the literary language, the relative pronoun **a** is used only for subjects and objects. In other cases, the form **y** is used, and this does not cause any mutation. Thus we might have

Gwelodd fy mrawd y bachgen bach yn y cae gwair

Y cae gwair y gwelodd fy mrawd y bachgen bach ynddo

My brother saw the little boy in the hayfield

The expression **ynddo** means *in it*. Pronouns are retained in such relative clauses in Welsh : the whole sentence might more literally be translated as *(it was)*

the hayfield which my brother saw the little boy in it. Jenkins (1962) suggests that the following literary emphatic sentence also contains the *y* relative pronoun (page 191) :

Yn y cae gwair y gwelodd fy mrawd y bachgen bach

Yet of course here there is nothing for the relative pronoun to refer to. This is an emphatic sentence possibly formed by analogy with a relative clause.

It would be interesting to see if there are any forms in the spoken language related to this. Although in speech the relative pronoun would disappear, an *unmutated* verb form might remain. On the other hand, as I have already mentioned, unmutated inflected forms are rare in the spoken language.

Conclusion

I have shown that the identification sentence is a distinct kind of sentence in Welsh, which cannot be expressed in verb-first form. There are also emphatic sentences in the language, in which items other than a verb appear in first place for emphasis. Some of these emphatic sentences are formed analogously to identification sentences, and others to relative clauses. Other emphatic sentences may just involve change of word order, with no analogy to other constructions. This is the kind of muddled situation one would expect if analogy is an important force in a child's language acquisition.

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