

Zero-Subject in the ‘be done’ Construction in Irish

YAMADA, Leo

Doctoral Course, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

Irish has two types of zero-subject: *impersonal* is expressed by a special verb conjugation; *apersonal* is expressed by a third-person singular verb form, but no grammatical subject appears in the clause. The ‘be done’ construction is a periphrastic perfect construction composed of an auxiliary verb and a verbal adjective (also called past participle). This paper considers characteristics of these two zero-subjects, based on data retrieved from an online corpus. As a result, the present paper argues that zero-subjects of the *impersonal* ‘be done’ construction denote a semantic agent, while those of the *apersonal* ‘be done’ construction denote a semantic patient. In addition, the *impersonal* ‘be done’ construction is very rare. It is proposed that this is because the ‘be done’ construction takes a semantic patient as a grammatical subject in the vast majority of cases, and this feature is incompatible with the characteristics of the subject of the impersonal form.

Keywords: Irish, impersonal, zero-subject

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1. Introduction

This paper considers the two types of zero-subjects that can be taken by the ‘be done’ construction in the Irish language¹ (Indo-European, Celtic, Insular, Goidelic).

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¹ The Irish language is spoken in Ireland by 44,000 people and labeled as *definitely endangered* (UNESCO). The total population on the Island of Ireland is approximately 660 million (480 million in the Republic of Ireland and 180 million in Northern Ireland). Irish is the first official language in the Republic of Ireland, but most people speak the second one, English, in their daily life. These days, the language is spoken in some areas called *Gaeltacht*. The preservation of the language is encouraged by the government and it is taught in schools as an obligatory subject.

I will argue that the semantic role (agent or patient²) of a grammatical subject is relevant with respect to the use of the two types of zero-subjects with the 'be done' construction: one type favors agents and the other favors patients.

First, some previous research (on the 'be done' construction, on the two types of zero-subjects and on zero-subject in the 'be done' construction) will be overviewed in §2 and some problems of analysis will be presented in §3. Then, the methodology of the study will be given in §4, and the results in §5.

Note that any glosses and translations without a special indication are ours.

2. Previous research

This section describes previous research on the 'be done' construction in §2.1, research on the two types of zero-subjects in §2.2 (the impersonal zero-subject in §2.2.1, and the apersonal zero-subject in §2.2.2), and on their combination, zero-subject in the 'be done' construction, in §2.3.

2.1. The 'be done' construction

Modern Irish has a VSO word order, as exemplified in (1). There, the first element *léigh* 'read' is the main verb, the second one *mé* 'I' (agent) is the grammatical subject, and the last one *an leabhar* 'the book' (patient) is the grammatical object. In this paper, such basic clauses will be called the *simple tense* construction.³

(1) *Léigh mé an leabhar.*

| | | | |
|-------------------|-----------|-----------|------------------|
| <i>léigh-Ø</i> | <i>mé</i> | <i>an</i> | <i>leabhar-Ø</i> |
| read-PST | 1SG.CNJTV | DEF.M.NOM | book.M-SG.NOM |
| 'I read the book' | | | |

When the 'be done' construction is applied to the simple tense construction, the result is like (2). This clause is composed of the substantive verb *bí* 'be' (*tá* in the present tense) and the verbal adjective of the verb *léite* 'read' (< *léigh* 'read'). The patient *an leabhar* 'the book', which corresponds to the grammatical object in the simple tense construction (1), is the grammatical subject in the 'be done' construction, while the agent *agam* 'by me', which corresponds to the grammatical subject in (1), is expressed by the preposition *ag* 'at' in (2).

² In this paper, the terms *agent* and *patient* denote semantic roles, not syntactic arguments.

³ This concept can be contrasted with the composed tense (e.g., in French, *j'aimai* 'I loved' [simple past] and *j'ai aimé* 'I have loved' [composed past]).

(2) *Tá an leabhar léite agam.*

tá-Ø an leabhar-Ø **lé-ite** ag-am
be-PRS DEF.M.NOM book.M-SG.NOM **read-VA** at-1SG
 ‘I **have** the book **read**.’

[example and translation from Ó Siadhail (1989: 299–300)]

The ‘be done’ construction is often called the perfective passive, but as Ó Siadhail (1989) points out, it can be applied to intransitive clauses like (3).

(3) *Tá sé imithe.*

tá-Ø sé **im-ithe**
be-PRS 3SG.M.CNJTV **go.out-VA**
 ‘He **is gone** off’

[example and translation from Ó Siadhail (1989: 299–300)]

When the ‘be done’ construction is applied to an intransitive clause, syntactic manipulations such as the promotion or demotion of arguments cannot occur and the grammatical subject in the simple tense construction retains its grammatical status even in the ‘be done’ construction.

In this paper, the author will not consider the features of the ‘be done’ construction itself, but the way in which it must be related to some sorts of the perfect tense.

2.2. Two types of zero-subjects

Concerning zero-subjects, na Bráithre Críostaí (1999)⁴ have suggested:

An Saorbhriathar: Is iad uimhir agus pearsa an ainmní a chinneann uimhir agus pearsa an bhriathair. Nuair nach luaitear aon ainmní úsáidtear foirm ar a dtugtar an saorbhriathar, sin nó foirm an tríú pearsa uatha gan ghníomhaí. Tá an saorbhriathar saor ar uimhir agus ar phearsa. Is gnách foirmeacha pearsanta a thabhairt ar na foirmeacha briathartha nach saorbhriathra.

The Free verb: It is the number and the person of the subject which determine the number and the subject of the verb. When any subject is not mentioned a form, called a free verb, or the third-person singular form without an agent, is used. The free verb is free from a number or a person. Personal forms are usually given to the verbal forms which are not free verbs.

⁴ En. the Christian Brothers.

[na Bráithre Críostaí (1999: 156)]

In other words, in Irish, there are two possibilities for the realization of zero-subjects. In this paper, I follow the terms in Hewitt (2002), which is a study on Breton (the other branch of the insular Celtic languages), and call them:

α : *impersonal* – free verbs

β : *apersonal* – third-person singular verbs without an agent

2.2.1. Impersonal zero-subject

In the following lines concerning the impersonal zero-subject, na Bráithre Críostaí (1999) use the term *impersonal* (*neamhphearsanta* in Irish) in a broad sense, so that it includes both *impersonal* and *apersonal* in this paper:

Is iad na saorbhriathra na foirmeacha neamhphearsanta is coitianta. Úsáidtear iad nuair nach mian nó nach gá nó nach féidir an gníomhaí a lua.

Is minic a fhreagraíonn an saorbhriathar aistreach don fhaí chéasta atá i dteangacha eile:

The free verbs are the most common impersonal forms. They are used when it is not desirable nor necessary nor possible to mention an agent.

It is often the case that the transitive free verb corresponds to the passive voice which exists in other languages.

[na Bráithre Críostaí (1999: 189)]

The sentence in (4) is an example of such a use, which corresponds to the passive voice in English.

(4) *osclaítear an doras in ainm an rí.*

| | | | | |
|--|---------------|---------------|----|---------------|
| osclaí-tear | an | doras-Ø | in | ainm-Ø |
| open-HPRS.IMPERS | DEF.M.NOM | door.M-SG.NOM | in | name.M-SG.NOM |
| an | rí-Ø | | | |
| DEF.M.GEN | king.M-SG.GEN | | | |
| 'the door is opened in the king's name' | | | | |

[na Bráithre Críostaí (1999: 189)]

Concerning the impersonal form in the Celtic languages, Hewitt (2002) has suggested:

All the Celtic languages have “impersonal” verb forms in *-r* and *-d*. In English-language Celtic studies, the term “autonomous” is also used. These forms are said to be related to the “passive” conjugation of Latin (*-itur*⁵), but there is only one form per tense (at least in the modern languages ...).

[Hewitt (2002: 15)]

In other words, verbs in many languages have six forms per tense (conjugated for three persons and two numbers), but verbs in the Celtic languages have seven forms per tense, as shown in Table 1. Note that, however, the paradigm of verb conjugation in Irish is incomplete, so that in the habitual present tense, only the first-person singular and the first-person plural have a conjugated form, while others are expressed analytically with personal pronouns.

Table 1 Irish Conjugation

| | <i>dún</i> ‘close’: habitual present | |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| | SG | PL |
| 1 st | <i>Dúnaim</i> | <i>dúnaimid</i> |
| 2 nd | <i>dúnann tú</i> | <i>dúnann sibh</i> |
| 3 rd | <i>dúnann sé</i> | <i>dúnann siad</i> |
| impersonal | <i>Dúntar</i> | |

[from na Bráithre Críostaí (1999: 160)]

2.2.2. Apersonal zero-subject

According to Stenson (1989), some sort of agent can be conceived in the impersonal zero-subject in Irish. For example, she argues that, as illustrated by examples (5) and (6), the impersonal form cannot be used like in (5) because ‘no agent, even implicit, is possible’, and the apersonal form is instead used, like in (6).

(5) **Neartaíodh ar an ngaoth.*

neart-aíodh ar an^E gaoth-Ø
strengthen-PST.IMPERS on DEF.F.NOM wind.F-SG.NOM
 (‘The wind **strengthened**’)

[example and translation from Stenson (1989: 387)]

⁵ This is the indicative passive present third-person singular (e.g., *emitur* ‘it is bought’).

(6) *Neartaigh ar an ngaoth.*

neart-aigh ar an^E gaoth-Ø
strengthen-PST on DEF.F.NOM wind.F-SG.NOM
 'The wind **strengthened**'

[example and translation from Stenson (1989: 386)]

The finite verb in the initial position of (6) is originally the third-person singular form (and sometimes it is referred to in this way), but no grammatical subject can occur in this type of construction. This is the impersonal zero-subject examined in this paper.

2.3. Zero-subject in the 'be done' construction

Stenson (1989) has argued that the impersonal zero-subject can be applied to the 'be done' construction, as in the following example:

(7) *Táthar buailte againn.*

tá-thar buail-te ag-ainn
be-PRS.IMPERS hit-VA at-1PL
 'They've been beaten by us'

[example and translation from Stenson (1989: 393)]

As mentioned in §2.1, the grammatical object (patient) of the simple tense construction is promoted to the grammatical subject in the 'be done' construction. The impersonal zero-subject is then applied to it, like in (7), where the promoted subject (the grammatical object in the simple tense construction) has been deleted and the substantive verb *bí* 'be' as an auxiliary is conjugated to the impersonal form *táthar*.

In other words, when the third-person plural pronoun *siad* 'they' in a personal 'be done' construction like (8) is deleted and the substantive verb *tá* 'is' is conjugated to the impersonal form, this results in an impersonal 'be done' construction like (7).

(8) *Tá siad buailte againn.*

tá-Ø siad buail-te ag-sinn
be-PRS 3PL.CNJTV hit-VA at-1PL
 'They've been beaten by us'

Stenson (1989) seems to consider that even in the impersonal 'be done' construction, as in the impersonal simple tense construction, some sort of subject expressed by the impersonal form is conceived (a patient in the former, and an agent in the latter).

In addition, instances of the impersonal ‘be done’ construction also occur, although Stenson (1989) does not take these into considerations. The following are examples retrieved from an online corpus, *Nua-Chorpas na hÉireann* (The New Corpus for Ireland).

(9) *Nuair a bhí ite, ólta againn,*

| | | | | | |
|--|----------------|--------|--------|----------|---------|
| nuair | a ^L | bhí-Ø | i-te | ól-ta | ag-ainn |
| when | REL.DIR | be-PST | eat-VA | drink-VA | at-1PL |
| ‘When (it) was eaten, drunk by us,’ | | | | | |

[icfe9802]

For this paper, a survey was carried out based on this corpus regarding the impersonal ‘be done’ construction and the impersonal ‘be done’ construction in order to clarify the difference between the two.

3. Problems with previous research

The impersonal ‘be done’ construction, as illustrated by Stenson (1989) in (7), in fact, is hardly used in the *Nua-Chorpas na hÉireann* corpus. In contrast, the impersonal ‘be done’ construction, like in (9), is used more often.

Regarding the characteristics of the zero-subject of the impersonal form, Stenson (1989) proposes the same interpretation for both the simple tense construction and the ‘be done’ construction. However, the zero-subject of the impersonal form is semantically an agent in the simple tense construction and semantically a patient in the ‘be done’ construction. Can her interpretation truly be applied to both constructions, even though the semantic role of each of their subjects is quite different (agent and patient)?

In addition, Stenson does not consider the impersonal ‘be done’ construction.

It is hypothesized in this paper that the subject of the impersonal form is limited to an agent, so that the impersonal form is incompatible with the ‘be done’ construction, which takes a patient as the grammatical subject.

4. Methodology

As mentioned above, the online corpus used for this study was *Nua-Chorpas na hÉireann* (The New Corpus for Ireland). This corpus contains 34,358,267 tokens and 29,886,201 words in total. It must be noted, however, that all of the corpus texts were

used for this study, which means that some texts whose author is not a native speaker or which have been translated from another language were also included.

The following queries were used for the search:

α : impersonal

[lemma="bí" & tag="Vm..0"]

- substantive verb *bí* 'be'
- verb (V), main verb (m), all moods (.), all tenses (.), person: impersonal (0)

β : apersonal

[lemma="bí" & tag="Vm.."]

- substantive verb *bí* 'be'
- verb (V), main verb (m), all moods (.), all tenses (.)

When the person is not designated, the third person singular form is obtained.

The data retrieved were then filtered by the regular expression: **(ta|te|tha|the|fa)*. These five forms are the possible endings of the verbal adjective. Note that, however, not all words ending in these five are verbal adjectives.

Last, it must also be noted that too many instances of the apersonal were retrieved to consider them all, so that only clauses beginning with the substantive verb *bí* 'be' are included in this paper, i.e. only clauses where neither an adverb (adverbial phrase) nor relative clause marker appears before the substantive verb *bí* 'be' will be taken into consideration.

5. Results and considerations

The type counts of the two zero-subject constructions in the corpus are given in Table 2.

Table 2 Frequency in Corpus

| Type | frequency |
|----------------------|-----------|
| impersonal 'be done' | 33 |
| apersonal 'be done' | 2,429 |

As expected, the impersonal 'be done' construction is very rare. Note that, the frequency of the apersonal 'be done' construction may not be exact, as explained in the previous section.

5.1. Impersonal ‘be done’ construction

Examples of the impersonal ‘be done’ construction with the following verbs occurred in the corpus (number of examples noted in parentheses):

tosaigh ‘begin’ (8), *tar* ‘come’ (4), *fág* ‘leave’ (2), *tabhair* ‘give’ (2), *oscail* ‘open’ (2), *gabh* ‘take’ (2), *meáigh* ‘estimate’ (2), *éirigh* ‘rise’ (1), *ceangail* ‘tie’ (1), *tóg* ‘raise’ (1), *imigh* ‘go out’ (1), *suigh* ‘sit’ (1), *bailigh* ‘gather’ (1), *caill* ‘lose’ (1), *mill* ‘ruin’ (1), *faigh* ‘find’ (1), *clis* ‘jump’ (1), *sáigh* ‘thrust’ (1)

The verb *tosaigh* ‘begin’ is the most frequent. In the case of this verb, the impersonal ‘be done’ construction, the zero-subject should be interpreted as an agent, who performs the event voluntarily.

(10) *Táthar tosaithe ag obair cheana féin*

| | | | | | |
|----------------------|------------------|----|---------|--------|------|
| tá-thar | tos-aithe | ag | obair | cheana | féin |
| be-PRS.IMPERS | begin-VA | at | work.VN | ever | self |

‘(They) *have begun* working already’

[iwx00480]

(11) *Táthar tosaithe ar chóireáil a dhéanamh*

| | | | | | |
|----------------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------------|----------------|----------|
| tá-thar | tos-aithe | ar ^L | cóireáil-Ø | a ^L | déan-amh |
| be-PRS.IMPERS | begin-VA | on | treatment.F-SG.NOM | to | do-VN |

‘(They) *have begun* to do treatment’

[itgm0119]

When motion verbs such as *tar* ‘come’, *éirigh* ‘rise’, etc. are rendered in the impersonal ‘be done’ construction, their deleted subject will be interpreted as an agent⁶ and this fact is compatible with the present hypothesis.

(12) *táthar tagtha go dtí an staid*

| | | | | | |
|----------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|------------------|
| tá-thar | tag-tha | go ^E | t-í | an | staid-Ø |
| be-PRS.IMPERS | come-VA | CMPL | come-SUBJ | DEF.F.NOM | stadium.F-SG.NOM |

‘(they) *have come* to the stadium’

[iwxu0101]

⁶ Note that, again, this term should be understood as a semantic one; it denotes the entity who performs the event.

‘(It) *has been begun* by Mac Scaidín to dance’
 (= ‘Mac Scaidín *has begun* to dance’)

[icco1232]

When example (16) with the verb *tosaigh* ‘begin’ is rendered in the simple tense construction, the result is a clause like (17). This is an intransitive clause and only an agent appears in the clause.

(17) *Thosaigh Mac Scaidín ar rince.*

^L **tos-aigh** Mac-Ø Scaidín-Ø ar rince-Ø
PM begin-PST PN.M-SG.NOM PN.M-SG.NOM ondance.M-SG.NOM
 ‘Mac Scaidín *began* to dance’

Even though this clause is intransitive – remember example (3) in §1, where a grammatical subject in the simple tense construction retains its grammatical position in the ‘be done’ construction – it can derive the impersonal ‘be done’ construction like (16) as if there were a patient as a grammatical object. This method can be formalized with the symbol Ø for the zero-subject as follows: *thosaigh Mac Scaidín Ø ar rince* (lit. ‘Mac Scaidín *begin* Ø on dance’) > *tá Ø tosaithe ag Mac Scaidín ar rince* (lit. ‘Ø *is begun* by Mac Scaidín on dance’).

The situation of example (18) is very different from that of example (16). In (18), the zero-subject is expressed by the impersonal form and clearly denotes an agent.

(18) *Táthar tosaithe ag obair cheana féin*

tá-thar **tos-aithe** ag obair cheana féin
be-PRS.IMPERS **begin-VA** at work.VN ever self
 ‘(They) *have begun* working already’

[iwx00480; identical to (10)]

6. Conclusion

Statistically, the frequencies of the impersonal ‘be done’ construction and the impersonal ‘be done’ construction are very different (33 versus 2479). This is most likely because of the incompatibility of the impersonal form and the ‘be done’ construction: the ‘be done’ construction takes a patient as a grammatical subject in the vast majority of cases (transitive verbs and some intransitive verbs) but the impersonal form normally requires an agent for its zero-subject.

Consider the following simple tense construction 'they began to dance':

(19) *Thosaigh siad ar rince*

^L **tos-aigh** siad ar rince-Ø
PM begin-PST 3PL.CNJTV on dance.M-SG.NOM
 lit. 'they **began** on dance'

If the *agent* as a grammatical subject becomes unspecified, i.e., zero-subject, it will derive an impersonal 'be done' construction, exemplified in (20). In this case, the auxiliary verb *bí* 'be' is conjugated to an impersonal form and the agent in the form of a zero-subject can be said to be placed in the grammatical subject position (just after the finite verb).

(20) IMPERSONAL

Táthar Ø tosaithe ar rince

tá-thar Ø **tos-aithe** ar rince-Ø
be-PRS.IMPERS **begin-VA** on dance.M-SG.NOM
 'Ø has begun on dance'

In contrast, if the agent as a grammatical subject remains specified, it will derive an apersonal 'be done' construction, exemplified in (21). In this case, the agent is demoted to a prepositional phrase and the patient in the form of a zero-subject is promoted to the grammatical subject position.

(21) APERSONAL

Tá Ø tosaithe acu ar rince

tá-Ø Ø **tos-aithe** ac-u ar rince-Ø
be-PRS **begin-VA** at-3PL on dance.M-SG.NOM
 'Ø is begun by them on dance'

At least within the scope of this study, the impersonal 'be done' construction seems to be quite exceptional. The process for deriving the two types of the 'be done' construction with a zero-subject can be illustrated as above, with the same verb, *tosaigh* 'begin'. This paper has confirmed the hypothesis at the end of §3: the zero-subject of the impersonal 'be done' construction is normally an agent while the zero-subject of the apersonal 'be done' construction is normally a patient.

However, there are a few examples which are difficult to clarify and fit into this theory. Further and more detailed research should be carried out in the future.

Abbreviations

| | | | |
|--------|------------------|------|------------------|
| 1 | first person | M | masculine |
| 3 | third person | NOM | nominative |
| CMPL | complementizer | PL | plural |
| CNJTV | conjunctive | PM | past marker |
| COMP | comparative | PN | proper noun |
| COP | copula | PRS | present |
| DEF | definite | PST | past |
| DIR | direct | REL | relative |
| F | feminine | SG | singular |
| GEN | genitive | SUBJ | subjunctive |
| HPRS | habitual present | VA | verbal adjective |
| IMPERS | impersonal | VN | verbal noun |

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