

‘What’s in a Name?’ About the Syntax and Philological Functions of Etymologies in the Táin¹

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I. Introduction

The subject of names, in the words of Farhang Zabeeh, is a varied and many-sided subject: ‘Poets, magicians, linguists and logicians have often been fascinated, puzzled and angered by the protean functions of proper names.’ (1968, 1). This paper, and the MA dissertation on which it is based, is one fascinated linguist’s attempt to consider the question of what’s in a name.

I suggest that possible frameworks for answering this question might be found in combined syntactic and philological studies of early Irish etymologies. To this end, I begin by sketching some basic assumptions, concerning Isidore of Seville and his conception of names, which is assumed to be the basis of the early Irish etymologies (section 2). Section 3 contains analyses of the syntax of the etymologies, using the terminology of Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG). Section 4 gives a brief sketch of some of the possible philological functions of the etymologies, concerning how the etymologies can be seen to express aetiology, and what their functions might be in the text. This is then seen in light of the syntactic analyses from section 3. Section 5 provides a summary and some concluding remarks.

2. Reflections upon what a name is: Isidore of Seville

In modern-day linguistics, a name can be seen as a special kind of word. The relation between the expression of the name and its referent is arbitrary and unique, and determined not by meaning, which the name is said to lack, but by a given context of utterance (Lyons 1984, 214).²

- 1 I would like to thank my supervisors Jan Erik Rekdal and Helge Lødrup for all kinds of help and support with this work.
- 2 It’s rather difficult to find linguistic literature dealing systematically with the subject of names. One recent publication which should go a way towards remedying this, is *The Grammar of Names* by John M. Anderson (Oxford University Press 2007). I have not been able to get hold of this book at the time of writing (January 2007).

In contrast to this approach is a conception of names found, among other places, in the writings of the 7th century Spanish bishop Isidore of Seville, and more specifically, in his *Etymologiae*. According to Isidore, a name can be given in one of two ways: either as an arbitrary designation, or according to the nature of its referent (Baumgarten 2004, 56-7). The latter manner of naming relates directly to Isidore's descriptions of etymology, as we shall see.

For the purpose of this work, I looked at the etymologies in a selected part of the *Lebor na hUidre* (LU) version of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (see section 4 for details of how my selection was made). The following is one of the examples I found. I give the preceding part of the tale in addition to the explicit part of the etymology (my emphasis), taken from Cecile O'Rahily's edition and translation (TBC 2003, 30 and 151-2).

1) Dagéini dano Lethan fora áth for Níth la Conailliu. Anais cadessin ara chind Con Culaind. Bá sáeth laiss a ndogéni Cú Chulaind. Ésgid dano Cú Chulaind a chend di súdiu; conid fácab laiss. **Is de atá Áth Lethan for Níth.**

Lethan came on to his ford over the Níth in Conaille, and he indeed waited to encounter Cú Chulainn. He was grieved by what Cú Chulainn had already done. Cú Chulainn cut off his head and left it there beside the body. **Hence is the name Áth Lethan on the Níth.**

In what sense can we term this story an etymology? The connotations of the modern science of etymology have not benefited our knowledge of medieval etymology, since the latter has been ignored and even ridiculed for its failure to live up to the standards of the modern science (as described by e. g. Baumgarten 1983, 225 and 1987, 1). I use the term 'etymology' for the medieval phenomenon even so, in its basic sense 'explanation of a word.'

According to Isidore, when an etymology is used to analyse a name, one gains knowledge of the name's referent (see e. g. Baumgarten 1983, 226 and 1987, 2, as well as 1990, 115 and 2004, 55-7). This follows when a name is given according to the referent's nature.

The etymologies analyse names through a process Baumgarten terms 'de-onymizing' (1990, 121 etc.). In the approach sketched here, de-onymizing can be said to take a name, in the modern sense of the word, and transform it into a common noun. In other words, de-onymizing changes the relation between the name and its referent, from a unique and arbitrary relation in a given context of utterance, into a relation of meaning. The new meaning reached in this way, is what provides knowledge of the referent of the name.

This can be illustrated through example 1. Here, we are first told how Lethan is killed by Cú Chulainn at a ford. The etymology then uses this tale to de-onymize

the name *Áth Lethan* by providing it with a meaning 'Lethan's ford,' where the genitival relation is taken to mean 'the ford where Lethan was killed.'

As a summary of the preceding discussion, three 'participants of etymology' can be defined: First of all, the name itself, as the object of the explanation. The second participant is the referent of the name. The third is the explanation/etymology itself, which defines the relation between the two others. These three participants will be used in the next section as a starting point for the syntactic analyses. In section 4, they will serve as the tool for seeing the syntactic analyses in light of various philological aspects of early Irish etymologizing.

3. Syntactic analyses of two realizations of etymology

Baumgarten in his articles (e.g. 1990, 115-16 and 2004, 64) suggests that etymologizing can be realized in two ways: implicitly, or formally and explicitly concluded by the narrator. I focus here on the latter, as this is where the study of syntax is relevant.

In my selection of the LU *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, I have found explicitly realized etymology with the two Irish verbs of 'being,' the copula and the substantive verb. In this section, I will give a syntactic analysis for each of these two types of realization. We will see that the three participants of etymology are realized differently in each of the two structures.

I ask the following questions of each of the structures: What is the predicate of the clause, and what arguments does the predicate take? How are the predicate and its arguments realized?

Starting with the copula, the clause in example 2 follows a description of how Medb's dog Baiscne is killed by Cú Chulainn (TBC, 27 and 149):

2) [*Druim Baiscne*] [*ainm inna maigni sin*] *íarom ó sin immach*.
name ART place.GEN that henceforth³
'Druim Baiscne was the name of that place henceforth.'

One way of describing this clause is to see it in light of the distinction between equative and attributive predication in copular clauses, as defined by e. g. John Lyons (1984, 185).

An equative clause consists of two definite nominal constituents which differ in meaning, but which are said to have the same reference. The following is a classic example of this type of clause (see Lyons 1984, 197-201 for discussion):

3 The following abbreviations are used in the glosses: ART – article; COP – copula; EXP – expletive; GEN – genitive; SV – substantive verb.

3) The Morning Star is the Evening Star.

This clause states of *the Morning Star* and *the Evening Star* that these expressions refer to the same celestial body, namely the planet Venus.

In contrast to this type of predication is the attributive copular clause (example from Lyons 1984, 185):

4) That girl is an actress.

Here, the clause consists of a predicative phrase, *an actress*, which states of the subject, *that girl*, that she has the property of being an actress.

The clause in example 2 consists of two definite phrases. In such a case, there are no grammatical markers (like the difference in definiteness in example 4) to distinguish between the two clause types. Further discussion on this topic have to be left out for reasons of space; I will assume for the purpose of this article, that the example in 2) is an attributive clause.

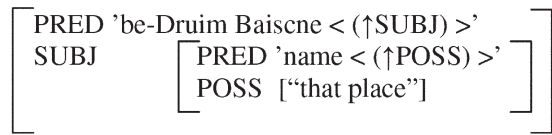
We next need to consider the syntactic functions of the two constituents in the clause in 2): Which one of the constituents realizes the subject and the predicate phrase, respectively? What is the relation between these arguments?

It is a well-known fact that the copula morpheme is frequently left out in Irish copula clauses. Also, when it does occur, it has more in common with proclitic elements like pre-verbs and articles than with regular verbs in terms of prosody and orthography (see Thurneysen 1946, 24-5 and McCone 1994, 211). These properties are, among others, in support of the hypothesis that the copula morpheme is not the syntactic head of the clause. I'm going to follow this hypothesis also for my early Irish example, and assume, in the words of Anders Ahlqvist (1971-72, 271) that the copula is a 'verb-making particle,' enabling the following constituent to function as the predicate of the clause.

In terms of LFG (leaving the details of the theoretical mechanics behind it aside), this proposal would state that the leftmost constituent is the PRED of the clause, which selects the final constituent as its subject. A corresponding analysis has been developed for Modern Irish in the framework of Government and Binding by Andrew Carney and Heidi Harley (1995) and in the framework of LFG as one possible functional structure of a copular clause in a cross-linguistic perspective by Mary Dalrymple, Helge Dyvik and Tracy King (2004). This analysis is further supported by such descriptive work as Thurneysen (1946, 475) and McCone (1994, 211), who both give the order copula morpheme + predicate as the regular order for copula clauses.

Based on this, we have the following f-structure for the clause in 2):

5)



This structure states that the name *Druim Baiscne* is the predicate of the clause, and that it selects for a subject *ainm inna maigni sin* – ‘the name of that place.’ In other words, the clause states of the subject, the name of a contextually given place, that it is realized by the phrase *Druim Baiscne*. Included in the clause in 2) is also an adverb phrase *íarom ó sin immach* – ‘henceforth’ – which is not involved in the predication.

Moving to an etymology with the substantive verb, I turn now to the example given in 1), repeated and glossed here as 6):

6) Is de atá [Áth Lethan] [for Níth]
 COP from-3sg.m. SV on
 ‘Hence is the name Áth Lethan on the Níth.’

This clause can be seen in light of another distinction of meaning relevant to the verb ‘be,’ namely between locative and existential predication. The following examples illustrate locative and existential sentences respectively (from Freeze 1992, 553):

- 7) There is a book on the bench.
 8) The book is on the bench.

Ray Freeze (1992) argues that locative and existential clauses are derived from the same underlying structure, with a preposition heading a predicate phrase which selects for a theme and a locative argument. The different realizations of the theme argument *at the book* in examples 7-8 is attributed to a definiteness effect, which leads to functional differences between the two structures.

Furthermore, Freeze (1992, 580-1) argues that there are languages, of which Scottish Gaelic is one, where the definiteness effect does not apply. The same can be said to hold true for early Irish. In consequence, the roles of theme and locative can be said to be realized in 6) by, respectively, the subject *Áth Lethan* and the pronominal complement of the prepositional phrase *de*. The latter constituent is placed at the front of the sentence as a result of the cleft construction, of which I will have more to say later.

Having defined the arguments of the clause, we again need to consider the predicate relation between them. Freeze, as mentioned, argues that the predicate

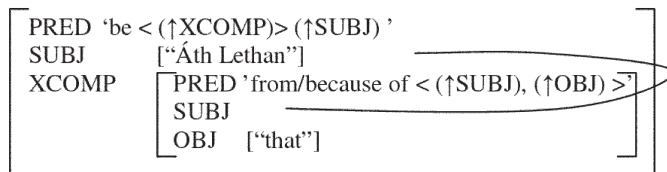
of the clause is a preposition, *on* in example 7 and 8. Is this the correct analysis for our early Irish example?

Joan Bresnan (2001, 275-80) presents three possible structures of predication for prepositional complements. In one of these structures, the preposition is said to be specifically selected by the verb with the same function as a case marker. A typical example of this is the oblique argument to the verb ‘give’ in a sentence like ‘Mary gave a rose to John,’ where *to* is selected by the verb in order to mark ‘John’ as the receiver of the giving. This analysis can be immediately excluded from consideration – there is nothing inherent in the substantive verb that demands the relation expressed in the preposition *de* to its complement.

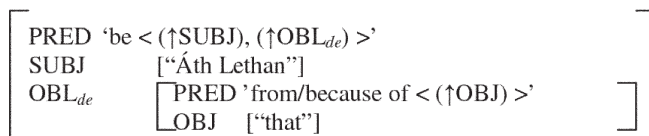
In the second structure, the preposition is seen as an open complement, selecting a subject in addition to an object. This corresponds to Freeze’s analysis as described above, with the preposition selecting for a theme and a locative. The substantive verb in this case would select for a thematic prepositional complement and a non-thematic subject. The latter function would be filled by the constituent selected as theme and subject by the preposition.

Corresponding to the third structure mentioned by Bresnan, the substantive verb would select for a subject and a prepositional complement, both thematic. The f-structure of these two analyses of example 6 can be generalized as follows (disregarding the cleft construction):

9) F-structure for example 6, with the preposition as the main PRED of the clause:



10) F-structure for example 6, with the prepositional phrase as an oblique argument of the substantive verb:



I will assume that the f-structure in 10) is correct for our example, based on the existence of clauses like 11), with an expletive prepositional complement *and* (example from Ó Máille 1912:62):

11) *ataat alaaili interiecta AND it coitchena do cach ceniul*
 SV some interjections EXP COP common to every nation
 'there are some interjections common to every nation'

Given that the prepositional phrase *and* in this example is seen as an expletive complement, we cannot but assume that the subject *alaaili interiecta* is selected by the substantive verb as seen in 10). In order to avoid positing different f-structures for sentences with the substantive verb depending on the semantic content of its complement, I will assume that the f-structure in 10) is correct also for example 6.

In this structure then, the subject of the clause is the name *Áth Lethan*. This name is predicated, through the preposition *de*, to exist because of, or have its origins in, a previously mentioned event referred to by the pronominal element of the preposition.

As mentioned above, the prepositional phrase *de* is placed to the front of the clause as a result of the cleft construction. A thorough description of the contribution of this construction to the clause is beyond the scope of this paper. I will therefore assume a generally accepted view of the cleft construction, namely that its purpose is to grammatically mark the pre-posed constituent, *de* in our example, as the focus or new information in the clause (see e.g. Lambrecht 2001).

To sum up, we can return to the three participants of etymology described in section 2, the name, its referent and the etymology explaining the name, and consider these in light of the two analyses of our examples, repeated here as 12) and 13):

12) [*Druim Baiscne*]_{PRED} [*ainm inna maigni sin*]_{SUBJ} *íarom ó sin immach.*
 name ART place.GEN that henceforth
 'Druim Baiscne was the name of that place henceforth.'

13) *Is de*_{OBL} *atá* [*Áth Lethan*]_{SUBJ} [*for Níth*]
 COP from-3sg.m. SV on
 'Hence is the name *Áth Lethan* on the *Níth*.'

We have seen in the preceding sections that the name is realized as the subject in 13), but as the predicate in 12). The referent of the name is realized in the subject phrase of 12) and not at all in 13).

It was said in section 2 that medieval etymology explains a name by providing it with a meaning. In our examples, we have seen that this meaning is taken from

events in the preceding texts. These events are referred to by the adverb phrases *íarom ó sin immach* and *de* respectively. As we have seen, the phrase *de* in 13) is selected by the verb, while the adverb in 12) is not. In other words, the etymology is a part of the predication in 13) but not in 12).

We observe that there are differences in how the participants of etymology are syntactically realized. What these differences might tell us is considered in the next section, where they are seen in light of various philological functions of medieval etymologizing.

4. Philological and textual functions of etymology

I ask in the title to this paper, ‘what’s in a name?’ So far, I have given one answer to this question sketched with the tools of a formal syntactic theory. We have seen illustrated that a name can be explained by providing it with a meaning, and that this process can be spotted in the grammatical functions of the clause with which the process is linguistically expressed. In this section, I will look further at philological aspects of early Irish etymologies, and see them in relation to the syntactic results from the previous section.

The examples from the *Táin* in this article are taken from the material I studied for my MA dissertation. I selected my material based on the following comment by James Carney in his *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, where he discusses the *Táin* before and after the introduction of the episode entitled *Aided Fraích* (to be found in TBC, 26-7): ‘Until this point the text, although there are doubtless many interpolations, has coherence and unity. (...) After this point, although the hand of the same individual is still there, the text becomes more episodic, there are a greater number of incidents which are merely of antiquarian interest, (...).’ (1955, 67).

Based on this statement, my selection begins with *Aided Fraích*, and ends at the first interpolation of H (lines 834-1544 in O’Rahilly 1976). Now Baumgarten (1990, 115-6) mentions three formal realizations of etymology: With the substantive verb, the copula, and with a passive clause *is de asberar x* ‘therefore x is so called.’ As mentioned above, only the two former were present in my material. Can a result such as this tell us something about the (part of the) text it is based on, and if so, how?

Baumgarten sketches one route to take, with the following comment: ‘(...) the dual character of which [i.e. aetiology and eponymy] is often linguistically reflected in the interchanging use of “is from” (subst. vb.) and “is named from” (...).’ (1983, 227).

We saw just this in the previous section: the etymologies in our examples were said to explain names through certain adverb phrases. These phrases referred to

previously narrated events, thereby explaining the names by providing them with a meaning relating to this event. In other words, our examples of etymology can be seen to focus on aetiology

We see, then, how a philological distinction can be pinpointed and even further nuanced through a syntactic analysis: Is there a significance to be found in the varying use of either the copula (where the etymologizing is 'weak,' i.e. outside the predication) or the substantive verb (where the etymologizing is 'strong'/contained in the predication)? Furthermore, what does it tell us about this part of the *Táin* that the formally realized etymology is expressed only with the two verbs of being, thereby focusing only on aetiology?

This latter question can be seen in light of what the etymologies' textual functions might be said to be. Baumgarten in his articles (e.g. 1987, 23-4 and 1990, 117) discusses what he terms 'creative etymology,' where the etymologizing of a name is used to create a tale, which is in many cases then integrated into a greater narrative framework. Might this be a possible function in the text of the *Táin* of the etymologies I looked at? If so, might it be said to follow from this that the etymologies focus on aetiology, if their function is to create the tale said to be the cause of the name?

This view also goes a long way towards explaining Carney's attitude to this part of the *Táin*, which was referred to above. He further comments that material which contains etymologizing is characteristic of sources 'where the antiquarian information is important rather than the story' (Carney 1955, 67n). The two episodic stories preceding our two examples of etymologizing certainly are, from the point of view under discussion, created and inserted into the *Táin* without any recognizable contribution to the story as a whole. If Carney's focus is the story, his attitude towards the etymologies is understandable.

From this yet other questions follow: What might have been the motivations for including in the *Táin* such stories created from aetiological etymology?

Morgan Thomas Davies' article *Protocols of Reading in Early Irish Literature* exemplifies a framework and literary approach which might be fruitful for the purpose of considering this question. He explores how it might be said to have been an ideal in Irish interpretative practice in the 10th and 11th centuries to search for as many meanings as possible in texts, and suggests that this interpretative ideal might be visible also in composition (Davies 1996, e.g. 19-23). In this context, he specifically mentions the LU *Táin*, as an example of how variant traditions and storylines are included at the cost of (what we would see as) a coherent narrative (1996, 21).

5. Concluding remarks

In summary, I hope to have proposed in this paper a possible framework for studying the question – through the early Irish etymologies – of what’s in a name, rather than answers to the question itself. I believe it can be shown that there are systematic differences in the syntax of how the etymologies are expressed, and that these differences can be studied in light of other, philological functions of etymologies.

There is another side to this as well, which is contingent on my preferred research focus: Being faced with examples of language use, such as the etymologies in the *Táin*, I have, in other words, asked with this paper why they have the syntactic form that we observe. Possible frameworks for studying *this* question have been shown to lie in two areas, internal and external to grammar and language (cf. Newmeyer 1998, ch. 3): I suggested grammatical and language-internal explanations from both the Irish language and non-language-specific considerations, while explanations unrelated to grammar were drawn from theories of the philosophy behind the etymologies and the etymologies’ textual functions.

My analyses are meant, in the final view of things, as an illustration of this kind of dual approach: I hope at least to have shown in this paper that one worthwhile approach can be to explain language use by factors both internal and external to the grammar, and that such factors can be fruitfully considered in relation to each other.

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