NOMINAL PREDICATION AND THE SEMANTICS OF ROOTS

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ABSTRACT

In Scottish Gaelic, an invariant pronoun is found in a construction involving a span of time or space and a 'from/since' phrase. I claim that the pronoun is in fact referential, rather than pleonastic. The pronoun refers to the span established by the complement of bho(n) 'from/since'. The 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

- Scottish Gaelic has sometimes been claimed not to have expletive pronouns (McCloskey 1996; cf. Adger 2011), but 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 C be.PST you   here
'It is (/has been) a year since you were here.'

- This appears 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/now] 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 'from/since' phrase is required:

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

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

- Note 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 nominal predicates 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 (5):

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

Open questions:

(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 bi involved, instead of is?

Roy's distinctions:

- Defining sentences: "maximal" predicates (define an individual) (e.g. noun with indefinite article in French)
  - Involve NumP and Max operator
- Characterizing sentences: "non-dense" predicates (e.g. bare nouns in French) (atomic/count: you can break them down into component parts)
  - Involve ClassP
- Situation-descriptive sentences: "dense" predicates (describe a situation) (like mass: homogeneous, not able to be broken down)
  - Involve some other functional structure (e.g., PP)

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 sentence 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.

- Roy (2006/2011, and others, e.g. Adger & Ramchand 2003) claim that a bare N/n is unable to create a predicate on its own; but Roy posits that count nouns in Classifier structure should be able to form predicates (with a "characterizing" reading):

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

- I claim that bi can in fact form "characterizing" nominal predicates in the case that a ClassP is present: a phonologically null Class head exists that is compatible only with certain nominals.

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

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

- 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.

1. We start with a root that has an interpretation in the environment of [SPAN].

2. This is merged with a [SPAN] nominalizer (light noun, à la Kramer 2018's analysis of plurality in herd nouns).

3. The resulting nP then merges with the PP to define the length of the span.

4. The resulting nominal cannot form a predicate; it merges with a [SPAN] classifier.

5. The (phonologically null) VI that can be inserted here contains the [SPAN] nominal in its context for insertion.

6. The projected ClassP then merges with Pred (instantiated by tha, etc.).

FURTHER DATA

- The span can be the time to get from point A to point B:

(8) Tha e coig mionaidean bhon a seo gus a rubha.
'It's five minutes from here to the point.'

- Or a non-canonical span, if given enough context:

(9) %Tha e fichead peann bhon a sheo gus a rubha.
'It's 20 pens from here up to the point.'

- The span can also be a distance even if the specifying PP is clausal:

(10) Tha e deich mile air fhichead bhon a thachair sin.
'It's 30 miles since that happened.'

- Past tense in the main clause yields a past-perfect-like meaning:

(11) Bha e bliadhna bhon a chunnaic mi Bob.
'It was a year since I saw [had seen] Bob.'

- Or the past state of the span:

(12) Bha e mu mhile bhon a sheo gus a rubha.
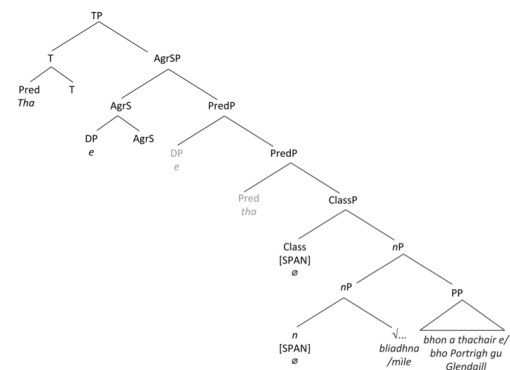'It was about a mile from here to the point' (but now it's less, due to the shifting plates)

- And, as expected, the nominal cannot involve an overt determiner:

(13) *Tha e a' bhliadhna air fada bhon a thachair e.
*'It's the whole year since it happened.'

- Nor can it be a mass noun (as below, when a fairy has turned the road to porridge):

(14) *Tha e brochan bhon a sheo dhan a rubha!
Intended: 'It's porridge from here to the point!'

(15)

CONCLUSIONS

- 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.

- Open questions include the existence of other Class heads in the language, and behavior with other spans (100 pages, 3 chapters, 100° C, etc. from X to Y)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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