

Syntax – Morphology interaction in the Modern Irish progressive construction

The purpose of the paper is to determine whether the so-called verbal nouns (VNs) in the Progressive construction in Modern Irish are a product of inflection or derivation.

The VN is described as ‘halfway between being nominal and belonging to the inflectional system of the verb’ (Ó Siadhail (1989: 195)) as the same phonological word may play the role of a non-finite form and a nominalization. The form *ól* is the VN of the verb *ól* ‘drink’.

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| 1 a. | <i>Caithfidh mé beoir a ól.</i> must I beer PRT drink-VN | ‘I have to drink beer’ | (Infinitive) |
| b. | <i>Táim tar éis beoir a ól.</i> I am after beer PRT drink-VN | ‘I am after drinking beer / I have drunk some beer’ | (Participle) |
| c. | <i>Táim ag ól beorach.</i> I am PRT drink-VN beer (gen.) | ‘I am drinking beer’ | (Progressive Verbal Aspect) |
| 2. a. | <i>Stad den ól.</i> stop from the drink-VN | ‘Stop the drinking’ | (Actional Nominalization) |
| b. | <i>Is milis an t-ól é.</i> is sweet the drink-VN it | ‘It is a sweet drink’ | (Concrete Nominalization) |

Previous (generative) research (McCloskey (1980; 1983), Ó Siadhail (1989), Ó Sé (2000)) runs into a quandary when confronted with the Irish data because it is based on the assumption that phonological form and its grammatical or lexical content are inseparable. We get a clearer picture if we study the functional aspect independently of its phonological realisation as proposed by Beard (1976, 1985, 1995). VNs are not a hybrid category. The same morphophonological devices mark categorially distinct items. Using syntactic, morphological and semantic criteria we can identify contexts in which we are dealing with nominalizations as in (2a, b) and verbs (1 a, b). VNs in the Progressive construction (1c) seem to occupy a mid-position on this verb-noun cline.

In (1 a. b.) the object of a complementised clause comes before the VN and it is in the common case. In the progressive construction (1c), the object directly follows the VN and it is in the genitive case governed by the VN. If VNs are non-finite verb forms, why is the complement characterised by typically nominal government? Our doubts are further justified by the fact that VNs can be inflected for the genitive case. Furthermore, there are different denominal VNs which don’t have a corresponding finite verb or infinitive and yet appear in the progressive phrase (Wigger (1972: 210-212); Ó Sé (2000: 364)). Gaps are characteristic of derivational processes.

The VN in the progressive construction appears to be a derivational category realising a morphosyntactic function. The paper brings VNs in the progressive in line with Anderson’s definition (1982:587), which says that ‘inflectional morphology is what is relevant to the syntax’. It accounts for three things: firstly, why the following NP is in the genitive case, secondly how come that it may be inflected for the genitive case and thirdly, why some verbal nouns lack verbal sources.

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