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The 'S e / 'S ann Construction in Scots Gaelic

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What, in Scots Gaelic, has been treated as a set of emphatic particles, can also be viewed as an example of the copula verb combining with non-verbal elements to form a predicate. The result is a more satisfying treatment of the emphatic construction.

1. 'S e ... / 'S ann ...

In Scots Gaelic, word order is normally VSO:

- (1) Tha an cat aig an doras.
be IND the cat at the door
The cat is at the door.

Certain particles and morphological changes show whether a verb form is INDEPENDENT - used primarily in main clauses, RELATIVE - used mostly in relative clauses, or DEPENDENT - used after most particles including the interrogative, negative, and subordinate clause markers.

Major sentence constituents are emphasized by putting them before the verb and adding either 'S e or 'S ann on front:

- (2) 'S e an cat a tha aig an doras.
the cat be REL at the door
It is the cat that is at the door.
- (3) 'S ann aig an doras a tha an cat.
at the door be REL the cat
It is at the door that the cat is.

One may emphasize a whole sentence with 'S ann:

- (4) 'S ann a tha an cat aig an doras.
be REL the cat at the door
Indeed, the cat is at the door.

The particles 'S e and 'S ann consist of the copula verb is plus either the third singular masculine pronoun e 'he, it' or ann which generally is a placeholder for semantically empty but syntactically obligatory non-NP slots. For example, ann must appear in

(5) because tha is always followed by an NP and a non-NP:

(5) Tha an t-uisge ann.
be IND the water

It is raining. (MacKinnon 1971:12)

'S e is always used in front of NP's.

'S ann is used before adjectives, prepositional phrases, and clauses.

The grammar books list forms with 'she' 'S i and 'they' 'S iad but they are not in common use.

2. The Cram proposal

David Cram (n.d.) proposes the following transformational treatment of the 'S e / 'S ann phenomena. It is the only other transformational treatment of the matter that I can find, and it is quite similar to the traditional treatment of the problem (cf. Moffatt-Pendar 1930, Munro 1843).

Cram has a family of transformations that move the topicalized element to the front and insert the appropriate form 'S e or 'S ann. For example, the object preposing transformation is:

(6) Object Topicalization (Optional)

		VP - NP - NP			
SD	1	2	3	SC	's e + 3 a + 1 2

(Cram n.d. 1.32, with slight change of notation)

However, this treatment ignores the fact that is is a verb. For example, is has a past form bu which can be used when the embedded verb is past or conditional.

(7) cf.(2) B'e an cat a bha aig an dorus.
=Bu e = is PAST+it the cat. be REL PAST at the door
It was a cat that was at the door.

This situation can be handled by an elaboration of the above transformation, but it would be preferable to treat the matter with all the other sequence-of-tense phenomena -- such as occur between

main and subordinate clauses, or in a discourse. Such a unified treatment cannot be achieved unless the 'S e / 'S ann particles are recognized as containing the verb is.

3. The verb is

in contradistinction to Cram's proposal, I will consider the 'S e / 'S ann phenomenon as a further use of the verb is.

3.1 Some motivational preliminaries

There is a tradition of treating sentences as consisting of a subject and something that is predicated about the subject. For instance, I could take Tom as my subject and tell you that he is an habitual, recreational user of skis:

(8) Tom skis.

This construction is quite parallel to the logician's:

(9) There exists T, such that s(T).

In (8), the predicate is stated with a verb, yet sometimes a natural language doesn't provide a lexical verb for the predicate one wishes to state. For instance, in order to attribute to Tom the habitual performance of the actions associated with a surgeon, I could try saying:

(10) Tom surgeons.

But in most kinds of English, this would be unacceptable because of the lack of a verb 'to surgeon' with the desired sense. There is a suitable noun 'surgeon' and it can be made into a predicate by the use of a copula verb giving us:

(11) Tom is a surgeon.

One of the principle uses of the copula verb seems to be to permit the formation of predicates when there is no suitable finite verb form available:

(12) Tom is a surgeon.
Tom is foolish.
Tom was struck by the revelation.

Note that there is no single finite form of passives or participles in English, so these forms end up taking an auxiliary in order that the predicate have a finite verb. The copula is one such auxiliary.

Suppose the predicate that one is trying to form does nothing more than attribute emphasis or special focus to an element -- an element which itself might be part of another predicate:

(13) Tom went to the store. 'Store' is emphasized.

In a more usual English form, this might be:

(14) It's the store (not the church nor the school) that Tom went to.

The predicate 'emphasis' shows up as a copula verb and the non-referential pronoun 'it', i.e. as It is Just like other English predicates that lack a finite verb, the abstract predicate 'emphasis' uses the copula verb. The predicate for skiing is ski, but the predicate for surgeon is be a surgeon, and for 'emphasis' the predicate shows up as It is

I want to use a very similar argument to explain the 'S e / 'S ann phenomenon.

3.2 The two verbs 'to be'

There are two Gaelic verbs glossed as 'to be' -- tha and is. They are used differently:

(15)	Is doctar Iain.	Tha	Iain	'na doctar.
	is doctar John	be IND	John	in his doctar
	VP NP NP	VP	NP	AP
	John is a doctor.	John is a doctor.		
	(Cram: 2.31)			

Tha takes an NP as subject and either an adjective or prepositional phrase -- what I will hereafter call an AP -- for its second argument. Its second argument can never be an NP:

(16) *Tha Iain doctar.
VP NP NP

Is, on the other hand, has no such restrictions. But note that it is the second argument of is that is the subject, i.e. what corresponds to the first argument of tha. The first argument of is is part of the predicate and the is provides the finite verb form that would otherwise be missing with nominal and adjectival predicates.

3.21 In support of this, consider how one replies to what, in

English, is a yes-or-no question:

(17) Am bheil an cat aig an dorus? Tha Chan eil.
inter- be DEP the cat at the door be IND neg- be DEP
rogative
Is the cat at the door? Yes. No.

(18) Am buail Iain Màiri? Buailidh. Cha bhual.
inter. hit FUT DEP John Mary hit FUT IND neg. hit FUT DEP
Will John hit Mary? Yes. No.

(19) Am b' e an cat a bha aig an dorus?
inter. is PAST it the cat be PAST REL at the door

B' e. Cha b' e.
is PAST it neg. is PAST it
Was it the cat that was at the door? Yes. No.

(20) An ann an raoir a chuala sibh an naidheachd?
inter.+is ann the evening heard REL you the news

'S ann. Chan ann.
is ann neg.+is ann
Was it last night you heard the news? Yes. No.
(Moffatt-Pender 1930: 7)

(21) Am b' eudar dhut coiseachd? B' eudar.
inter. is PAST must to you walking is PAST must
Did you have to walk? Yes. (MacKinnon 1971: 178)

The reply is normally just the verb in the appropriate positive or negative form, (17),(18). With is however, it must include the pronoun, (19),(20), or whatever else is put into that slot -- (21) has a modal. From this we can conclude that 'S e is on a par with tha, and that either one forms what I am calling a predicate.

3.22 The comparative in Gaelic is made with the verb is and a comparative form of the adjective which together form a predicate:

(22) Is bàine Calum na Seumas.
is+fairer Calum comparative particle James
Calum is fairer than James. (bàin = fair coloured hair)

The comparative is often combined with the 'S e construction:

- (23) 'S e Calum as bàine na Seumas.
 is it Calum is REL fairer c.p. James
 It's Calum who is fairer than James.

The commonest way of forming the comparative uses tha as a main verb, but even then the is+comparative-adjective shows up:

- (24) {Tha} Calum {nas bàine} na Seumas.
 {Bha} {na bu bhàine} na Seumas.
 be {PRES} Calum particle+is {PRES} fairer c.p. James
 {PAST} {PAST}
- Calum is/was fairer than James.

Furthermore, the so-called 'second comparative' uses is plus a form of the adjective related to the comparative:

- (25) Is feàrrd thu siud.
 is good you that
 You are the better of (for?) that. (MacKinnon 1971: 149-50)

All of this demonstrates the ability of is to take a non-verbal element and form a predicate. The predicate can be considered a slot within a clause; it contains the finite verb and these non-verbal elements that combine with is; unlike the usual VP category, it doesn't include the direct object, etc.

3.23 In Gaelic one says:

- (26) Is toigh leam an cat.
 is pleasing with me the cat
 I like the cat.

Is toigh leam is the predicate which is predicated about the subject an cat. In Dwelly (1949) there are over sixty such predicates listed, and Munro (1843:132) offers some more:

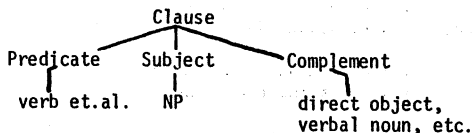
- (27) Is òghnadh leam I wonder = is surprising with me
 is beag orm I hate = is small on me
 is mòr agam I esteem = is big at me

In each case, there is a predicate formed with is plus non-verb elements.

3.3 Underlying structures

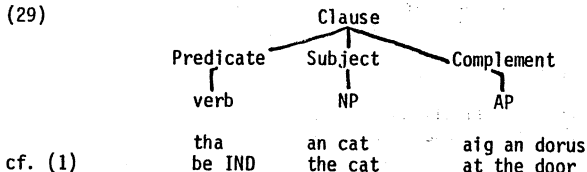
Somewhere in the underlying structures, we want to represent clauses by trees of this general form:

(28)



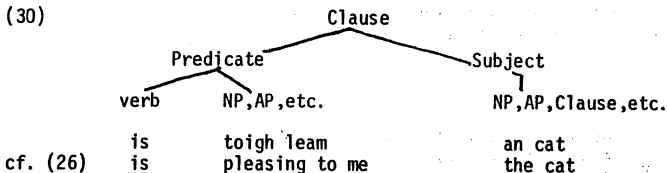
For tha this structure will simply be:

(29)



For is the structure will normally be:

(30)



It would seem that the comparative construction with is, (22), (23), (24), also can take a complement, i.e. na Seumas 'than James'.

The subject of is can be an NP or an AP. Often these phrases expand as a head term plus a relative clause, (2), (3) where the general process of relativization can be called on to mark the verb as relative. For example, the subject of (2):

(31) an cat a tha aig an dorus the cat that was at the door
 the cat be REL at the door
 Head Relative clause

is is formed in exactly the same way as the following relative construction found elsewhere:

(32) ... dh'fhaicinn an rud a bha a' tachairt.
 ... to see the thing be REL PAST at happening
 Head Relative clause
 ... to see the thing that was happening. (Oftedal 1956:265)

Although it is somewhat unusual to have a prepositional phrase as the head of a relative clause, (3), it is quite anomalous to have for a subject, a relative clause with no head at all (4):

(3) rep. 'S ann aig an dorus a tha an cat
is ann at the door be REL the cat
Head + Relative clause = Subject of is
 It's at the door that the cat is.

(4) rep. 'S ann a tha an cat aig an dorus.
is ann be REL the cat at the door
Headless relative clause = Subject of is

Indeed, the cat is at the door.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to imagine the verb tha being IND (since it is not in the main clause) or DEP (since it is not dependent on any particles), so perhaps the verb is marked relative by a process of elimination and by analogy to the case of the NP, (2), where relativization would be expected. However, such a situation is difficult to explain formally. For the time being, we will simply say that generally the highest verb in the subject of an is clause is marked REL. (see section 4)

3.4 Is and emphasis

Having decided that the basic structure of an is clause is Predicate + Subject, we may now look at the emphatic clauses like (2),(3),(4). Clearly we may treat the topicalized element as the subject as we did in (31) for example (2). The question remains, what is being predicated? What is it that needs the use of an is verb which otherwise is only used with non-verbals to form predicates? Of course, the predicate is emphasis, and there is not only no verb for it but there is no suitable lexical item for it at all. We will represent it abstractly as EMPH. It appears on the surface as e or ann quite like the English It or There that I have used in my English glosses.

As an illustration, we can represent our original examples by the following trees. The process of relativization, suitably extended to AP's and clauses, will arrange everything under the Subject node. The only additional machinery needed is a transformation that turns EMPH into e when followed by an NP, and ann when followed by an AP or clause.

It is precisely these forms that show up in the 'S e / 'S ann construction when the subject contains one of these personal pronouns:

- (37) 'S mise a tha aig an dorus.
is EMPH+I be REL at the door
 It's me that's at the door.

A rule that takes EMPH + mi etc. into mise etc. could handle all the occurrences of these emphatic pronouns, and provide independent motivation for an abstract element EMPH.

3.5 The proposal

In summary, the proposal here is to predicate EMPH about a clause or part of a clause, relying on the general properties of is clauses to give us the required surface forms. The only additional machinery needed is a constraint to ensure that clauses under the subject of is are marked REL, and a rule to realize EMPH, namely:

- (38) EMPH + mi, etc. → mise, etc.
 EMPH → e / NP
 EMPH → ann / AP or Clause

4. A bonus

When the sentence element to be emphasized comes from a clause that is more than one clause below the is+EMPH clause, all of the intervening clauses are marked REL:

- (39) Thubhairt Calum gum faca e Màiri.
 said IND Calum complementizer saw DEP he Mary
 Calum said that he saw Mary (No is; No REL)

- (40) Thubhairt Calum gur h-e Màiri a chunnaic e.
 comp.+is DEP+ it Mary saw REL he
 Calum said that it was Mary that he saw. (One REL below the is)

- (41) 'S e Màiri a thubhairt Calum a chunnaic e
 said REL saw REL
 It was Mary that Calum said that he saw (Two REL's below the is)

If the emphasized element itself is a dependent clause, that remains dependent -- but again all the intervening clauses are marked REL:

(42) 'S e gum faca e Màiri a thubhairt Calum.
 is it comp.saw DEP he Mary said REL Calum
 It is that he saw Mary that Calum said.
 What Calum said was that it was Mary that he saw.

(43) 'S e gur h-e Màiri a chunnaic e a thubhairt Calum.
 is it comp. is DEP+ it Mary saw REL he said REL Calum.
 It is that it is Mary that he saw that he said.
 What Calum said was, that it was Mary that he saw.

(Cram n.d. 2.42-45)

The bonus is this: if one wishes to support a theory with cyclical COMP-to-COMP node raising, one could argue that the emphasized element is generated in a lower clause and moved cyclically into successive COMP nodes (sister to what I've called Clause nodes) leaving behind a trace namely the REL marker. This is one way of accounting for the constraint about clauses under the subject node being REL (including (42),(43)) but unfortunately it does not explain how an entire clause which is never moved becomes REL,(4).

The intricacies of the REL marking makes an interesting testing ground for various theories like cyclical COMP-to-COMP node raising. Perhaps that is the biggest bonus of all.

Notes

In addition to the references cited, Gaelic examples were developed from the course of instruction in MacKinnon (1971) and the lectures and field notes of H.E. Rogers.

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