

Prepositional Possessive Constructions in Celtic Languages and Celtic Englishes

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1. Introduction

One of the often noted characteristic features of the Celtic languages is the absence of a singular verbal form with the meaning ‘to have’.¹ The principal way of expressing possession is through periphrastic constructions with prepositions (such as Irish *ag*, Scottish Gaelic *aig* ‘at’; Welsh *gan*, Breton *gant* ‘at, with’) and appropriate forms of the substantive verb. Pronominal prepositions, another distinctive feature of the Celtic languages, consist of a preposition and a suffixed pronoun, or rather a pronominal personal ending. This construction may be analyzed as an instance of category fusion. Thus, the Irish and Welsh equivalents of English ‘I have money’ are *Tá airgead agam* or *Mae arian gen i*, respectively, both literally meaning ‘is money at-me/with-me’. This note discusses pronominal possessive constructions in Celtic languages (and some comparable examples from Celtic Englishes) and provides some background information on pronominal prepositions and comments on historical developments of these forms. It also discusses some terminological issues involved in labelling the construction in question.

This is only a preliminary study with modest ambitions; it solely reviews relevant literature and takes into account data predominantly from historical, descriptive and pedagogical grammars and dictionaries. Further research would require consulting data from appropriate language corpora and providing a theoretical explanatory account of these constructions.²

¹ This issue has attracted considerable attention among specialists in Celtic, and more generally, in Indo-European languages. For a recent overview, from a comparative Irish-Russian perspective, see Bayda (2006).

² For a systematic account of the Irish constructions, see Ó Corráin (1997 a, b; 2001).

2. Terminological Remarks

The construction discussed in this paper consists of a preposition and a personal pronoun (or personal ending). It is often referred to as an ‘inflected preposition’ or ‘conjugated preposition,’ ‘pronominal preposition,’ ‘prepositional pronoun,’ and ‘suffixed pronoun’. Lewis and Pedersen (1974) in their comparative Celtic grammar, and Evans (1964) in his grammar of Middle Welsh, refer to this construction as ‘conjugated prepositions,’ while Morris-Jones (1913) in his historical comparative grammar of Welsh writes about ‘inflected prepositions’. Thurneysen’s (1946) grammar of Old Irish uses the notions ‘suffixed pronouns’ and ‘conjugated prepositions,’ whereas McCone (2005) in his Old Irish grammar refers to these combinations as both ‘prepositional pronouns’ and ‘conjugated prepositions’. Contemporary Welsh grammars usually use the terms ‘conjugated prepositions’ interchangeably with ‘inflected prepositions,’³ whereas contemporary Irish grammars (including handbooks and course books) in most cases use the form ‘prepositional pronouns’.⁴ However, as noted by Ó Dochartaigh (1992: 81):

[I]t would seem preferable to consider them simply as prepositional phrases in which the governed noun-phrase element is marked for person, number and (in the third person singular) gender.

Taking into consideration all crucial properties of the construction, for the purpose of this paper I use the term ‘conjugated preposition’ interchangeably with ‘pronominal prepositions’.⁵

This phenomenon is not confined to Celtic languages, and as has been observed by Doyle and Gussmann (1997: 43-44) it can be found, though marginally, also in Polish, as in the following forms: *patrzyła nań* ‘she was looking at-him,’ *pisła doń* ‘she was writing to-him,’ *odwróciła się odeń* ‘she turned from-him,’ etc. Also Spanish uses the fused forms *conmigo* ‘with-me’ and *contigo* ‘with-you’ (but *con él* ‘with him,’ and *con ella* ‘with her’). In both cases, however, the occurrence of these forms is highly restricted: to the third person singular masculine pronoun and handful of prepositions in Polish, and to the preposition *con* ‘with’ in the first and second person singular in Spanish (additionally, there exists the reflexive pronoun *consigo* ‘with oneself’).⁶ In contrast to the Pol-

³ As in King (1993), Thomas (1992 a), Thorne (1993), and Williams (1980).

⁴ E.g. Christian Brothers (1980), Bammesberger (1983), Ó Siadhail (1989), Mac Congáil (2004). This term has been translated into Irish as *forainmneacha réamhfhoclacha*, cf. *Gramadach na Gaeilge* (1979: 34).

⁵ As in e.g. Stenson (1981), Ó Dochartaigh (1992), Ternes (1992), Stifter (2006). See also the remarks in Doyle and Gussmann (1997: 43) on the interchangeability of some terms.

⁶ Similar forms are also found in Portuguese and Galician. The origin of such words can be traced to the contracted forms in Latin in which the personal pronoun in ablative case (*ablativus sociativus*) was joined with the enclitic preposition *cum* ‘with,’ yielding forms such as *mecum*, *tecum*, *secum*, *nobiscum*, *vobiscum*, cf. Wikarjak (1980: 38).

ish and Spanish forms, the Celtic ones possess regular paradigms and occur very frequently in a whole range of phrasal and idiomatic constructions.

3. *Origin of Celtic Conjugated Prepositions*

The prepositional system of the Celtic languages includes a set of most common prepositions (such as ‘at,’ ‘to,’ ‘with,’ ‘by,’ ‘from,’ etc.) which show personal endings. Historically, these forms result from old formations in which the preposition was closely joined to the personal pronoun which it governed. In post-prepositional position the personal pronouns appeared in unaccented and reduced forms, suffixed or infixes to the prepositional stem.⁷ The process has been described as ‘fusion,’ ‘agglutination’ or ‘incorporation,’ as in the following definitions:

In Welsh as in Irish the pronoun is regularly fused together with the preposition (Strachan 1909: 37).

Personal pronouns forming objects of prepositions in Brit[ish] and Goidelic came to be agglutinated to the prepositions, and ultimately developed into mere inflexions (Morris-Jones 1913: 397).

A personal pronoun as object, governed by a preposition, is generally incorporated with the preposition and the latter is conjugated similar to a finite verb (Holmer 1962: 78).

A close study of Celtic grammars reveals that the conjugation of the preposition is very similar to that of the verb and has been influenced by verbal forms.⁸ Stifter (2006: 87) has recently noted that the very “term ‘conjugation’ is in fact not absolutely appropriate, as the ‘endings’ of the conjugated prepositions have nothing in common with the inflectional endings of the verbs”. On the other hand, if *conjugation* is taken in its etymological sense of ‘joining together,’ the term seems to be most appropriate indeed.

The paradigmatic behaviour of pronominal prepositions is illustrated below, in tables 1 and 2. Table 1 presents the preposition frequently occurring in constructions expressing possession with the meaning ‘at, with, by, of, from’ (henceforth **AT**). Table 2 presents, for comparative purposes, the conjugation of the preposition ‘on, near, at’ (henceforth **ON**). It is always difficult to provide exact

⁷ Cf. Evans (1964: 58), Lewis and Pedersen (1974: 193), and most recently McCone (2005: 58) and Stifter (2006: 87), according to the latter these ‘personal endings’ are historically “nothing but the personal pronouns of Proto-Celtic, which formed an accentual unit with the preceding preposition and consequently came into such close contact that the two eventually merged and came to be regarded as a single unit”.

⁸ This point has been made by, among others, Bammesberger (1983: 56) on Irish, Holmer (1962: 78) on Scottish Gaelic, Morris-Jones (1913: 397) and Evans (1964: 58) on Welsh, and Hemon (1975: 89) on Breton. Pokorny (1914: 77) notes that “the primitive order of things has been much disturbed by the working of analogy”.

singular translations of prepositions. Ó Dónaill's (1977) dictionary gives numerous examples of usage of Ir. *ag*, but translates it only as 'at' and 'for' (1977: 10-11). Similarly with *ar*, translated as 'on,' 'in,' 'at' (1977: 55-56). Evans and Thomas (1958) give only one equivalent for W *ar*, namely 'on,' but examples involve expressions with 'away' and 'at' (1958: 26). *Gan* is translated as 'with,' 'by,' 'from,' 'since' (1958: 231).

The Goidelic forms of **AT** derive from OIr. *oc* 'at; with,' cf. Pokorny (1914: 77) and Thurneysen (1946: 275), the reconstructed common Brittonic form for **AT** is **kanta* (> OW *cant*, MW *can*, W *gan*, Co. *gans*, OB *cant*, B *gant*; cf. OIr *cét*), cf. Morris-Jones (1913: 406) and Falileyev (2000: 21). The Goidelic variants of **ON** derive from the conflated forms of OIr. prepositions *for* 'on' and *ar* 'for, on account of,' cf. Thurneysen ([1980]: 275).⁹ The Common Celtic form could be suggested as **uor/*war* (> OW *guar*, MW *gor*, *gwar*, Co. *gor*, *war*, OB *guar*, B *war*; cf. OIr. *for*), cf. Morris-Jones (1913: 400) and Falileyev (2000: 64).¹⁰

Tables 1 and 2 show the full paradigms for the discussed pronominal prepositions in six Celtic languages (Welsh, Cornish, Breton, Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Manx), they are based on descriptive and comparative grammars of individual languages and do not include numerous historical and dialect variants. Additionally, there exist differences between literary and colloquial forms, which can be illustrated with examples from Welsh. The tables below provide the literary forms, cf. Williams (1980), Thorne (1993), whereas their colloquial equivalents are the following, cf. King (1993):

- 1) **gan**: *gen i, gen ti, ganddo fe, ganddi hi, ganddon ni, gennych chi, ganddyn nhw*;
- 2) **ar**: *arna i, arnat ti, arno fe, arni hi, arnon ni, arnoch chi, arnyn nhw*.

Celtic prepositions not only display a multitude of meanings, they also frequently appear in metaphorical and idiomatic expressions, and one of their characteristic usages is in possessive constructions (discussed in section 5). It may be claimed that Celtic prepositions convey meanings which in other languages are expressed by other categories (verbs, adjectives, adverbs).¹¹ It has been observed already by A.G. van Hamel (1912) that: "in Irish syntax prepositions take

⁹ Cf. also the following remark in the most recent Gaelic-English dictionary: "This prep[osition] is derived from three different Irish words" (Mark 2004: 20).

¹⁰ Evans (1964: 188) observes that the various meanings of MidW *ar* suggest that it represents different prepositions, including OW *guar*, *guor* (cf. Ir. *for*) and OW *ar* 'before, for'.

¹¹ Cf. Harris (1993), Ó Corráin (1997 a, b; 2001).

a much more prominent place than in that of any other language”.¹² Furthermore, the influence of Celtic prepositions has been attested in Celtic Englishes.¹³

Table 1: Celtic preposition **AT**

	W	Co.	B	Ir.	Sc. G	Mx
	gan	gans	gant	ag	aig	ec
1 sg.	gennyf	genev	ganin	agam	agam	aym
2 sg.	gennyt	genes	ganit	agat	agad	ayd
3 sg. m.	ganddo	ganso	gantañ	aige	aige	echey
3 sg. f.	ganddi	gensi	ganti	aici	aice	eck
1 pl.	gennym	genen	ganimp/ ganeomp	againn	againn	ain
2 pl.	gennyh	genowgh	ganeoc’h	agaibh	agaibh	eu
3 pl.	ganddynt	gansa	ganto/gante	acu	aca	oc

Table 2: Celtic preposition **ON**

	W	Co.	B	Ir.	Sc. G	Mx
	ar	war	war	ar	air	er
1 sg.	arnaf	warnav	warnon	orm	orm	orrym
2 sg.	arnat	warnas	warnout	ort	ort	ort
3. sg. m.	arno	warnodho	warnañ	air	air	er
3. sg. f.	arni	warnedhi	warni	uirthi	oirre	urree
1 pl.	arnom	warnan	warnomp	orainn	oirnn	orrin
2 pl.	arnoch	warnowgh	warnoc’h	oraibh	oirbh	erriu
3 pl.	arnynt	warnedha	warno/ warne	orthu	orra	orroo

3. Preposition **ON**

This section provides selected examples of various phrases and constructions with the preposition **ON** in Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh and Breton. The examples come from the grammars and dictionaries listed in the references (which provide numerous other examples together with various classifications), only in

¹² A.G. van Hamel (1912), ‘On Anglo-Irish Syntax,’ in: *Englische Studien* 45, quoted after Filppula (1999: 218). For similar remarks, see also Henry (1957: 132).

¹³ For a detailed discussion of prepositional usage in HE, see Filppula (1999). A similar phenomenon has been observed in Hebridean English, cf. Sabban (1982), and in Manx English, cf. Moore (1924) and Broderick (1999).

some more complicated, archaic or regional variants the exact sources are identified below.¹⁴

- 3) **Irish** *ar*
ar bhád ‘in the boat’
ar chrann ‘on a tree’
ar an mbord ‘on the table’
ar neamh ‘in heaven’
ar maidin ‘in the morning’
ar a seacht a chlog ‘at seven o’clock’
ar tosach ‘at front’
ar clé ‘on the left’
ar díol ‘for sale’

Chuir mé orm mo chóta ‘I put my coat on’ (put I on-me my coat).
Shocraigh sé ar imeacht ‘he decided to go off’ (Ó Siadhail 1989: 263).

- 4) **Scottish Gaelic** *air*
air an loch ‘at the lake’
còig mìle an ear air Inbhir Nis ‘five mile east of Inverness’
turus air choigrich ‘a journey abroad’
air leith shuil ‘one-eyed’ (on half-eye)

air an là, air an oidhche ‘by day and by night’ (on the day, on the night)
(Calder 1923: 292)

Tha còta snog oirre ‘she has a nice coat’ (is coat nice on-her).
Tha an leabhar air a’ bhòrd ‘the book is on the table’.
Greas ort! ‘Hurry up!’

- 5) **Welsh** *ar*
ar fwrdd y gegin ‘on the kitchen table’
edrych ar ‘to look at’
gwrando ar ‘to listen to’
cael gwared ar ‘get rid of’
ar agor ‘open’
ar unwaith ‘at once’
ar droed ‘on foot’

- 6) **Breton** *war*
war an daol ‘on the table’

¹⁴ The examples in this paper are in most cases very simple, even simplified. However, their main objective is to illustrate the construction discussed. Also the literal translations focus on the appropriate constructions and ignore further details (irrelevant in the context of the main topic).

war ar maez ‘in the country’
war ar sizhun ‘during the week’
war va zu ‘towards me’

Irish *ar* and Gaelic *air* frequently co-occur with abstract nouns referring to emotions, feelings and sensations.¹⁵ For simplicity, the Irish examples below are restricted to the third person singular only and may be literally translated as ‘is *x* on-me’, where ‘*x*’ is the name of the relevant state, feeling or sensation:

- 7) *Tá áthas orm* ‘I am happy’
Tá amhras orm ‘I suspect’
Tá codladh orm ‘I am sleepy’
Tá eagla orm ‘I am afraid’
Tá náire orm ‘I am ashamed’
Tá tart orm ‘I am thirsty’
Tá slaghdán orm ‘I have a cold’

Some of the above examples refer to unpleasant feelings, ailments and negative states;¹⁶ also Mark (2004: 22) observes that Scottish Gaelic *air* is often associated with expressions of illness or trouble, and gives the following examples:

- 8) *Dè tha ceàrr ort?* ‘What’s wrong with you?’
Dè tha a’ cur air? ‘What ails him?’
Tha an cnatan orm ‘I have a cold’
Bha am fiabhras air ‘He had the fever’
Bha an cianals air ‘He was homesick’

Comparable structures are attested in Celtic Englishes, and may be considered as one of the diagnostic properties of substratal influence in these varieties, cf. Tristram (1997: 43).

Very interestingly, Joyce (1910: 26) offers a highly ‘normative’ comment on such usage:

Prepositions are used in Irish where it might be wrong to use them in corresponding constructions in English. Yet the Irish phrases are continually translated literally, which gives rise to many incorrect dialect expressions.

Dolan (1998) notes that Irish English (or Hiberno-English) *on* often indicates loss or injury, and Filppula (1999: 219-220) distinguishes, following the analyses of Irish, two major functions of the HE preposition *on*. In the first function

¹⁵ Cf. the discussion in Ó Corráin (1997 a, b; 2001).

¹⁶ For a list of nouns occurring with *ar*, see Christian Brothers (1980: 137), and the examples in Dinneen (1927: 54-55).

it conveys injury or disadvantage (cf. *dativus incommodi*),¹⁷ in the second one it expresses various physical and mental sensations, states or processes, mostly negative, or perceived as such. The first use is exemplified in (9), the second in (10):

- 9) This day the fire went out on him ... (Filppula 1999: 219)
 He lost my knife on me. (Dolan 1998: 189)
 The cow died on me. (Dolan 1998: 189)
 The cock was stolen on me. (Dolan 1998: 189)
 He put lies on me. (Joyce 1910: 26)
- 10) The breath was gettin' short on him. (Filppula 1999: 220)
 ... have quite a drop of drink on them. (Filppula 1999: 220)
 The climate is a fright on you. (Filppula 1999: 220)
 The nerves went on him. (Filppula 1999: 221)

Such constructions are often used as literary devices, especially characteristic of the stylistically marked prose of the Irish Literary Revival (e.g. Lady Gregory's 'translations' of Irish literature, W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge) and early 20th-century literature (e.g. Patrick MacGill):¹⁸

- 11) There is sickness on you. (Lady Gregory)
 There is dread on me. (Lady Gregory)
 There will be mockery on me. (Lady Gregory)
- 12) The weight of grief that is on her. (W.B. Yeats)
- 13) Her husband was after dying on her. (J.M. Synge, *The Aran Islands*)
 His cow had died on him. (J.M. Synge, *The Aran Islands*)
 There was great anger on him. (J.M. Synge, *The Aran Islands*)
- 14) It's all my fault and sorrow is on me because I made you suffer. (P. MacGill)
 Curses be on you! (P. MacGill)

Furthermore, dictionaries of Irish English note several examples of phrasal hybrids with the main noun in Irish, and the relevant preposition in English (but following the Irish usage), e.g.:

¹⁷ See also Joyce (1910: 27), who notes the idiomatic use of the preposition (*ar*) to "intimate injury or disadvantage of some kind, a violation of right or claim," and Bliss (1984: 149), who observes that Ir.E *on*, like its Ir. counterpart *ar*, forms "a 'dative of disadvantage' designating the victim of any kind of unfortunate occurrence". Also Ó hÚrdail (1997: 190) discusses the "detrimental relation expressed with the [HE] preposition *on*".

¹⁸ Examples (11)-(12) come from Cisto (2002: 18), and (14) is from Amador-Moreno (2006: 160), see the latter for a comprehensive discussion and detailed bibliographical references.

- 15) There's not a *brón* on her. (Dolan 1998: 43)
 'She shows no signs of grief'
 What *eagla* is on you? (Dolan 1998: 114)
 'What are you afraid of?'
 I have a great *gortach* on me. (Dolan 1998: 130)
 'I am very hungry'
 Everyone had great *meas* on him. (Dolan 1998: 172)
 'Everyone had great respect for him'
 He has no *meas* for money. (Ó Muirithe 1996: 135)
 'He doesn't care for money'
 I had no *meas* on where I left the coat. (Macafee 1996: 220)
 'I had no recollection where I left the coat'
 You'll bring *náire* down on us! (Ó Muirithe 1996: 143)
 'You'll bring shame on us'

Also the Welsh preposition *ar* is often used following nouns such as, for example, 'lack' (*eisian*), 'need' (*angen*), 'fault' (*bai*), 'fear' (*ofn*), 'shame' (*cywilydd*), and names of other temporary states of mind or body, and following the names of diseases, infections and ailments, cf. Thorne (1993: 398):¹⁹

- 16) *Nid oes ofn arnaf*. 'I am not afraid'
Cywilydd arnat. 'Shame on you'
Mae'r frech goch arni. 'She has measles'
Mae pen tost arnaf i. 'I have a headache'
Roedd y ddannoedd arni. 'She had a toothache'

4. Preposition AT

The Celtic preposition **AT** is equally versatile and occurs in numerous phrases and idioms, some more typical examples are provided below:

- 17) **Irish** *ag*
ag an teach / ag baile
 'in the house' / 'at home, at a town'
ag an tine 'at the fire'
ag barr an staighre 'at the top of the stairs'

¹⁹ See also the lists of relevant nouns in King (1993: 235-236) and Williams (1980: 133). Cf. Evans (1964: 186), who notes that MidW *ar* is "commonly used with the verb 'to be' to express a mental or physical condition". Breton uses in analogical constructions the preposition *gant* 'at,' e.g.: *Me a zo gant an droug-penn* 'I have a headache,' cf. also the examples in (20), below.

Tá sé ag an doras ‘he is at the door’
ag an Aifreann ‘at the Mass’

Tá mo chroí briste aici.

‘She has broken my heart’. (is my heart broken at-her)

18) **Scottish Gaelic** *aig*

aig an tigh / aig baile

‘in the house’ / ‘at home’

aig an doras ‘at the door’

aig seachd uairean ‘at seven o’clock’

19) **Welsh** *gan*

prynu gan ‘buy from’

cael gan ‘receive from’

gan amlaf ‘usually’

Mae’n ddrwg gennyf ‘I am sorry’ (is bad at-me)

Dysgwch ganddi ‘learn from-her’

Mae’n dda gennyf eich gweld.

‘I am happy to see you’ (is good at-me your sight)

20) **Breton** *gant*

gant e vamm

‘with mummy’

Hi a zo gant an droug-dant

‘She has a toothache’

Ma ne ver ked debred gant ar ffubu, e ver laz ’hed gant an dommder.

(Hewitt 2002: 28)

‘If you are not eaten alive by the mosquitoes, you are killed by the heat’

(If one is not eaten with the mosquitoes, one is killed with the heat)

The Irish and Gaelic preposition *ag/aig* is used together with the relevant form of the substantive verb *bí* and an appropriate verbal noun to denote action in progress (21), or with the past participle to denote a completed action (22):²⁰

21) **Irish**

Tá sí ag ól ‘she is drinking’

Tá tú ag obair ‘you are working’

Scottish Gaelic

Tha mi ’g imeachd ‘I am going’

²⁰ In this usage, *ag* is often considered to be the ‘agentive marker,’ in contrast to the ‘possessive marker,’ discussed below, cf. Bayda (2006: 137) and references therein.

22) **Irish**

Tá an obair déanta agam

‘I have done the work / the work is done’ (is the work done at-me)

Tá an leabhar leite agam

‘The book is read by me’ (is the book read at-me)

MacAulay (1992 b: 205) notes that *ag/aig* ‘at’ is “normally found in ‘dynamic’ verbal contexts” (23), whereas *an* ‘in’ can be found in ‘stative’ correlates (24), both examples below are from Scottish Gaelic:

23) *Tha Iain a’ cadal*

‘Iain is falling asleep’ (is Iain at sleep)

24) *Tha Iain ’na chadal*

‘Iain is asleep’ (is Iain in-his sleep)

The two prepositions discussed in this paper (also in their conjugated forms) may co-occur in numerous constructions (examples from Irish):²¹

25) *Tá tinneas cinn orm agat*

‘You give me a headache’ (is headache on-me at-you)

Tá meas agam air

‘I have respect for him / I esteem him’ (is respect/esteem at-me on-him)

Tá airgead agam ort

‘You owe me money’ (is money at-me on-you)

Tá ceist agam ort

‘I have a question for you’ (is question at-me on-you)

Tá aithne agam ar Eibhlín

‘I know Eileen’ (is knowledge at-me on Eileen)

or: *Tá aithne ag Eibhlín orm*

(is knowledge at Eileen on me)

Ó Siadhail (1989: 265) claims that idioms with the preposition *ar* ‘on’ are in contrast to the idioms with *ag* ‘at,’ “which are in some way less passive” and “this less passive quality is further highlighted by the use of *ag* rather than *ar* when followed by a prepositional phrase which does not in turn precede a finite clause”; this behaviour is illustrated by the following examples from Munster (26) and Connacht (27), cf. Ó Siadhail (1989: 265):

26) *Bhí eagla orm*

‘I was afraid’ (was fright on-me)

Tá eagla agam roimis na fir

²¹ For further examples of phrases involving two prepositions, see Christian Brothers (1980: 136-137).

- ‘I am afraid of the men’ (is fright at-me before-it the men)
 27) *Tá éad orm*
 ‘I am jealous’ (is jealousy on-me)
Beidh éad agam leat
 ‘I will be jealous of you’ (will be jealousy at-me with-you)

The above remarks might be extended to the use of *ag* in possessive constructions, discussed in the next section.

5. Prepositional Possessive Constructions

It is a well known fact that possession in Celtic languages is expressed not by a simple lexical verbs (such as Eng. *have*), but rather through appropriate prepositional possessive constructions.²² As remarked by Ó Corráin (1997a: 92) possession is “a state rather than an action and as a consequence, in Irish as in many languages, it is expressed nominally rather than verbally”.²³ The typical Irish equivalents of the English verb ‘to have’ involve the substantive verb *bí* (in appropriate form) and the personal form of the preposition *ag*, e.g.:

- 28) **Irish**
Tá airgead agam ‘I have money’ (is money at-me)
Tá teach ag Seán i gConamara
 ‘Sean has a house in Conemara’ (is house at John in Conemara)
An bhfuil carr nua aige?
 ‘Has he got a new car?’ (is-QUESTION car new at-him)
Tá beirt mhac aige
 ‘He has two sons’ (is pair son at-him)
Bhí sos fada againn
 ‘We had a long break’ (was break long at-us)
- 29) **Scottish Gaelic**
Tha airgead agam ‘I have money’ (is money at-me)
Tha taigh aig Seumas ‘Seumas has a house’ (is house at Seumas)
Dad a tha agad (Calder 1923: 256)
 ‘anything you have’ (anything is at-you)
- 30) **Manx**
Ta argid aym ‘I have money’ (is money at-me)

²² This is especially true about the Goidelic languages and Welsh; Breton and Cornish have developed a verb with the meaning ‘to have,’ see the remarks below.

²³ For analogical remarks on the nominal character of Welsh, see Thomas (1997: 80) and the references quoted therein. For a discussion of correlations (syntactic and semantic) between the expression of being and the expression of possession, see Ó Corráin (1997 a, b).

Ta cabbyl ec Juan ‘John has a horse’ (is horse at John)
Ta thie ec y dooinney ‘The man has a house’ (is house at the man)

The same construction is also used to express the extended and metaphorical sense of possession, examples from Irish, from Ó Dónaill’s dictionary (1977: 10-11):²⁴

- 31) *Bíodh ciall agat* ‘Have sense’ (be-IMPER. sense at-you)
Tá an tsláinte aige ‘He has good health’ (is the health at-him)
Tá go leor le déanamh agam
 ‘I have a lot to do’ (is a lot with doing at-me)
Tá grá aici air ‘She loves him’ (is love at-her on-him)

Phrases with the preposition *ag* are also used to express the meaning of ‘know/have knowledge of,’ also in the context of knowing a language:²⁵

- 32) *Tá a fhios agam*
 ‘I know’ (I have knowledge < is his knowledge at-me)
Tá snámh agam ‘I can swim’ (is swimming at-me)
Tá agam! ‘I have it’ (= ‘I comprehend’)! (is at-me)
Tá Gaeilge agat ‘You know Irish’ (is Irish at-you)

Similar constructions are used in Scottish Gaelic and Manx:²⁶

- 33) **Scottish Gaelic**
Tha Gàidhlig gu leòr aige
 ‘He knows Gaelic well’ (is Gaelic a lot at-him)
Tha fhios agam air sin
 ‘I know about it’ (is knowledge at-me of it)

- 34) **Manx**
Ta fys aym ‘I know’ (is knowledge at-me)
T’eh jarroodit aym ‘I have forgotten’ (is forgotten at-me)

Other ways of expressing possession in Irish and Scottish Gaelic include constructions with another preposition, *le* ‘with,’ and the copula *is*:

- 35) **Irish**
mac liom ‘a son of mine’ (a son with-me)
Is le Seán an teach ‘Sean has a house’ (is with Sean the house)

²⁴ See also the discussion and classification of such expressions in Ó Corráin (1997 a, b, 2001).

²⁵ According to Ó Siadhail (1989: 266), such examples provide additional support for the “more active quality” of idioms with *ag*.

²⁶ Broderick (1999: 161) offers a comparable example from MxE: *It’s forgotten at me*.

Ba le Dónall an madra ‘Donald had a dog’ (was with Donald the dog)
Cé leis é? ‘Whose is it?’ (whose with-him (is) it)
Ní liom an t-airgead
 ‘This money is not mine’ (not-is with-me this money)

Also the following possessive constructions are possible:²⁷

36) **Scottish Gaelic**

Tha an cù aig Calum

‘Calum has got the dog’ (is the dog at Calum)

Tha an cù aig Calum

‘The dog belongs to Calum’ (is the dog with Calum)

MacAulay (1992 b: 182) explains the difference between the above examples in the following way: in full sentences, expressions with *aig* denote ‘in the possession of,’ whereas expressions with *le* have the meaning of ‘belonging to’.

Comparable constructions denoting possession in Welsh are built with the verb *bod* (‘to be’) together with the preposition *gan* (in North Welsh) or *gyda* (South Welsh). The following examples come from literary (Williams 1980: 135) and more colloquial Welsh (Thorne 1993: 403):

37) *Mae gan y gwr hwn ddau fab* ‘This man has two sons’
Aur ac arian nid oes gennyf ‘Gold and silver I have none’

38) *Mae car gwyn ganddi* ‘She has a white car’
Mae digon o arian gan ei thad ‘Her father has plenty of money’

Additionally, possessive constructions in different Welsh dialects may show differences in word order and relevant consonant mutations, cf. King (1993: 320):

39) **North Welsh**

Mae arian gan i ‘I have money’ (is money at-me)

South Welsh

Mae arian gyda fi ‘I have money’ (is money with-me)

North Welsh

Mae gan John gar ‘John has a car’ (is at John car)

South Welsh

Mae car gyda John ‘John has a car’ (is car with John)

In comparison to Irish and Welsh, Breton (and also to some extent Cornish) has a lexicalized form of the possessive verb which developed out of the exis-

²⁷ These expressions exist in addition to typical genitive possessives, e.g. *cù Chaluum* ‘Calum’s dog’ (dog Calum-GEN).

tential verb ‘be’ and a proclitic oblique personal pronoun, cf. Hewitt (2002: 4): *meus* (< *am eus*) ‘I have’ (to-me there-is, cf. Lat. *mihi est*), and Ternes (1992: 425), who notes that *am eus* ‘I have’ may be translated literally as ‘my being’.²⁸

Also Cornish expressed possession in constructions composed of a particle, an appropriate infix pronoun having dative meaning and the verb *bos* ‘to be’.²⁹

40) *Ny’m bes whane* ‘I do not have lust’ (NEG-me is lust)

As noted by Brown (1992: 131) the compound form ‘there is to me’ is treated as “though it were a transitive verb with the meaning ‘have’”.

Constructions with an infix personal pronoun were attested especially at the earlier stages of the development of the Insular Celtic languages.

6. Historical Remarks

Infix dative pronoun forms (i.e. dependent forms) with the verb ‘be,’ used to express possession, are well attested in Old Irish and Middle Welsh, e.g.:

41) Old Irish

ro-sm-bia lóg (Lewis and Pedersen 1974: 196)

‘they shall have (the) reward’ (reward shall be to them)

ro-t-bia (Thurneysen 1975: 255)

‘thou shalt have’ (cf. Lat. *erit tibi*)

42) Middle Welsh

chwiorydd a’m bu (Evans 1964: 57)

‘I had sisters’ (sisters were to me)

ac y’m oed y eireu, ac y’m oed i ieitheu (Evans 1964: 57)

‘and I had words, and I had languages’

(and to me were words, and to me were languages)

car a’m oedd ny’m oes (Morris-Jones 1913: 279)

‘I had a friend but I have not’ (a friend there was to me, there is not to me)

am bo (Strachan 1909: 37)

‘may I have’ (may there be to me)

²⁸ See also Hemon (1975: 212-219) on the historical development and variants of this form, and Desbordes (1983: 63-4) and Press (1986: 139-140) on contemporary restrictions on usage (e.g. it does not occur sentence-initially). Apart from this lexicalized construction, Breton also uses prepositional possessive constructions, e.g. *Un dañvad a oa ganti* ‘she has a sheep’ (one sheep is at-her).

²⁹ Examples from Thomas (1992 b: 350). On the historical development of such forms, see Lewis & Pedersen (1974: 210-211).

However, already in the Middle Welsh period possession was expressed, as it is in Modern Welsh, through constructions with the verb ‘be’ and an appropriate form of the preposition *can*, *gan* ‘at/with’:

43) **Middle Welsh**

naw cant oed genhyf inheu (Evans 1964: 190)
 ‘nine hundred had I’ (nine hundred was with-me)

Middle Breton and Old Cornish provide comparable examples with infixed pronoun forms:

44) **Middle Breton**

Crist haz-uez trugarez ouzimp (Lewis and Pedersen 1974: 214)
 ‘Christ have mercy upon us’
 (Christ will be your mercy at-us)

45) **Old Cornish**

gallos a-m bues (Lewis and Pedersen 1974: 210)
 ‘I have power’ (power to me is)

7. Conclusion

According to Schmidt (1993: 69) and MacAulay (1992 a: 6) the lack of a synthetic verbal form with the meaning ‘have’ is an archaic feature of the Celtic languages. Furthermore, Mac Eoin (1993: 142) stresses the conservative nature of Irish, which has not introduced (or borrowed) such a verb, despite fifteen centuries of contacts with other languages. Possession is expressed via analytic constructions, however, the very idea of conjugated prepositions (with underlying category fusion) seems to illustrate a process aiming at some form of syntheticity.³⁰

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³⁰ It may be observed in the context of the above discussion, that a reverse process – decomposition of prepositional pronouns – has occurred in Late Manx, under the influence of English, cf. Broderick (1999: 134-135).

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