Response to Erich Poppe's Contribution on "Celtic Influence on English Relative Clauses?"

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Just when we thought that the question of stranded prepositions in Modern English had been laid to rest once and for all in Isaac's contribution to CE III – "the easiest [grammatical feature] to dispose of"[1] (Tristram 2003: 47) – along comes Erich Poppe's paper in this volume to remind us that the issue is very much alive and well. He comes to the same basic conclusions as Isaac, that contact with Celtic languages, in particular with Welsh, is less likely an explanation than developments which are intrinsic to the English language itself. At most, these intrinsic developments could have been reinforced by contact. Both authors rightly point out that there is no such thing as preposition stranding *per se* in Welsh; but the seemingly logical conclusion, that the question of contact therefore simply does not arise, is in my view a rather hasty one. The other feature of English relative clauses – 'contact clauses,' in which the relative pronoun is apparently absent – is also considered to be probably due to language internal developments, thus leaving little or no room for explanations "resorting to" language contact. The very choice of vocabulary (see Poppe, this volume, p. 208f above) suggests that language contact should be invoked only when all else fails. As Theo Vennemann pointed out in the ensuing discussion, there is no reason to consider language contact as a last resort.

Non-Welsh speakers will, I am sure, welcome a short summary of the features in Welsh which could have given rise to both preposition stranding and contact clauses in English. I shall then attempt to clear up a few points, then point out how language contact could have taken place after all.

There are just two configurations. For the sake of convenience, I shall call them *A* and *Y*, both of which may involve something akin to preposition stranding and/or surface omission of the 'relative pronoun' or 'particle.'

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[1] Itself a fine example of preposition stranding.

A

The antecedent is Subject or Direct Object of the 'relative clause:' [*a* + lenition (°) of verb]

(1) *Y   dyn   a   °werthodd   y   ci*   (sell = *gwerthu*)
     The man   [S/O] sold   the dog

As *a* can be Subject or Direct Object, this could mean 'The man who sold the dog' or 'The man whom the dog sold,' depending on the context… In this type of clause, if there is a preposition, it has to govern an element (underlined) which is not represented by *a*:[2]

(2) *Y   neges   a   °anfonais   i   at<u>at</u>*   (send = *anfon*)[3]
     The   message [O]   sent   I   to-<u>you</u>

     'The message I sent you'

Since *a* stands for the element in the main clause which is to function in the 'relative clause' as Subject or Object, it can be regarded as a genuine relative pronoun, not simply a 'particle.' In speech, it is often omitted, as are unstressed, semantically weak elements in any language (Wudga say? = What did you say? / *Weiß ich nich = Das weiß ich nicht / Chais pas = Je ne le sais pas*). But it does not always disappear altogether: there is usually a surface trace of its presence in the lenition of the verb.

Y

All other cases: [*y* or *yr* or *'r* + anaphoric element somewhere in 'relative clause']. Important: the above should not be confused with the definite article *y* or *yr* or *'r* …
Here, there is an anaphoric element – some sort of pronoun – which picks up that part of the main clause which is to play a role other than Subject or Direct Object in the 'relative clause.' But this anaphoric element is not at the beginning of the 'relative clause.' It is either a possessive:

(3) *Y   weddw   y   lladdwyd   <u>ei</u>   gŵr   yn   y   rhyfel*
     The widow   was-killed <u>her</u> husband in the war

     'The widow whose husband was killed in the war'

or governed by a preposition, as in example 2 above:

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[2] Isaac (Tristram 2003: 48, note 5) maintains that the pronoun in clause final position has to be third person. This is probably true only in the *Y*-configuration; in the *A*-configuration it can be any person, not necessarily third.
[3] Vowels are not affected by lenition.

(4) Y^a *mae*   *y*   *gadair yr*^{b} *ydych*   *yn*   *eistedd*   *ar<u>ni</u>*   *yn*   *sigledig*
         is   the   chair   you-are   sit   on-<u>her</u>   shaky

      'The chair you're sitting on is shaky'

The relative pronoun *a* may be semantically weak, but *y* (or *yr*, or *'r*) carries
no semantic weight whatsoever[4], and can therefore not be called a pronoun. All
the more reason for leaving it out in speech. Furthermore, unlike *a*, it never
leaves any surface trace at all when left out, as it is not followed by lenition or
any other mutation. Like the operator (Y^a) that begins the above main clause
with a form of *bod* ('to be'), the second *y* (in this case *yr*) is there simply to indi-
cate that what follows is an affirmative statement. In fact, both may well be ex-
actly the same operator, despite the fact that one introduces what grammarians
would call a 'main clause,' and the other a 'relative clause.' This would mean
that in Welsh, the distinction between the two is irrelevant, hence the inverted
commas. This view echoes that of Evans (1964: 64, quoted by Poppe), who ar-
gues in favour of the juxtaposition of two independent clauses, rather than the
subordination of one of them.

There are three points I would like to clarify before proceeding. The first two
concern Tristram's assertion (1999: 23f., quoted by Poppe) that "[t]he Welsh
pronoun in the clause final position may be inflected for person and number and
is therefore stressed." Firstly, as this pronoun is anaphoric, picking up given in-
formation in the utterance, there is no more reason to stress it than a relative
pronoun in any other language. Hard as I try, I am unable to imagine any utter-
ance in which this would apply. What is stressed – as in almost all words in
Welsh – is the penultimate syllable, in this case the preposition. Secondly, she is
perfectly right in saying that it *may* be inflected, notwithstanding Isaac's claim
that it "*is, must be*, inflected" (Tristram 2003: 48, note 5; author's italics). The
simple reason is that many common prepositions do not inflect at all, like *gyda*,
efo ('with'), and all combinations of *ar*: *ar ôl* ('after'), *ar ben* ('on top of') etc.
In these cases, the pronoun is present as a separate lexical item, not as part of the
preposition-pronoun lexeme. Thirdly, there is the issue of verbal forms which,
according to Preusler, fulfil the function of relative pronouns. My personal view
is that this is a red herring with which Poppe deals more than adequately in his
paper, and I have no more to add to his discussion.

My main point concerns the following question: How could contact with
Welsh, which has no preposition stranding as such, have given rise to preposi-
tion stranding in English? The answer I propose may appear quite superficial, to
say the least: Because the structure in Welsh involving prepositions, inflected or
otherwise, *looks like*, or rather *sounds like* preposition stranding. Languages
come into contact – need I remind anybody? – on the acoustic rather than on the

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[4]   Erich Poppe and I agree to differ on this issue. His position is that "*a* and *y* are not seman-
      tically empty, but have the syntactic function to define the function of the element they fol-
      low, i.e., subject/object or adverbial" (pc.).

written level, and most definitely not on the level of linguistic analysis. And what comes over on the acoustic level are stressed items, those which carry semantic weight. In example 4:

Y^a	mae	y	gadair	yr^b	ydych	yn	eistedd	ar<u>ni</u>	yn	sigledig
	is	the	chair		you-are		sit	on-<u>her</u>		shaky

the invitation to get off one's chair is unequivocal, since what is heard goes something like [chair – you're – sit – on – shaky]. This is probably quite independent of which language is being used by the bilingual whose native tongue is the contact language, since any attempt at using the target language will favourise meaningful, semantically significant elements at the expense of metalinguistic operators.

In the above example, what comes over closely resembles the Modern English equivalent given in the translation: 'The chair you're sitting on is shaky.' There is little or no audible trace of the relative particle or pronoun, and what is left of *arni* (literally 'on-her') is only the preposition, since it is this part that carries stress. Even if the speaker is attempting to use English and comes up with 'on her' or 'on it,' the addressee would tend to ignore the pronoun since, as far as he is concerned, the anaphoric element – the relative pronoun –'should be' at the very beginning of the relative clause. This is perfectly consistent with the different (one could even say incompatible) strategies of information packaging in the two languages. In Welsh, new information tends to precede 'old' or 'given' – in this case the anaphoric pronoun –, whereas in English the opposite is true: 'old' or 'given' information in the form of the relative pronoun precedes the new.

In other words, language contact in this area between Welsh and English seems to me to be a distinct and plausible possibility. The structures involving preposition stranding and contact clauses are part and parcel of the modern standardised language, which is not necessarily the case in other European languages. In French and German, any variation on the theme of relative clauses is confined to oral, non-standardised varieties, and this domain is particularly prone to non-standard flights of fancy. Oral French, for example, has constraints which may or may not obtain elsewhere: for some reason, only the prepositions *avec* ('with') and *sans* ('without') can be stranded (*celle que j'suis avec* = the 'girl I'm with;' from a song by Renaud), despite the fact that French speakers seem to be allergic to the only standardised structure there is, namely pied-piping, and go out of their way to avoid it in speech. As for oral German, it is interesting to note that the examples given by Poppe reflect almost exactly the Welsh *Y*-configuration: the linking particle, *wo*, has lost all semantic content (it no longer means 'where') and the anaphoric element (*da-* or simply *d-*) comes later in the clause and is combined with the preposition. In general, the domain of relative clauses seems to be a highly volatile one in several languages, and the best thing we can do for now is to keep all our options open. That includes "resorting to" language contact.

References

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