

# Independent Developments in the Genesis of Irish English<sup>1</sup>

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## *1. Introduction*

A recurrent and possibly the most debated topic in the study of Irish (Hiberno-) English (IrE) is the historical source or sources of the various non-standard features this variety of English possesses. It has become a widespread practice to look for the source of the non-standard features in either earlier dialects of English or in Irish, which is the language English has been in contact with for centuries. The former approach has been referred to by labels such as ‘retentionist view’ or ‘superstratum account,’ whereas the latter is widely known as the ‘transfer’ or ‘substratum analysis’ (Filppula 1999).

In restricting the possible sources of the non-standard features of IrE to either substratum or superstratum, most – if not all – approaches implicitly or explicitly adopt the methodology of historical linguistics, specifically the comparative method. To be sure, in this particular case the comparative method is not used to establish genetic relationships between languages. It rather operates in the opposite direction. On the assumption that the specific properties of IrE may either have been passed on from earlier dialects of English or be due to influence from Irish, the systematic comparison of morphosyntactic forms and their respective functions is used to establish their historical source. An additional assumption is that English and Irish are genetically distant enough to allow a precise localisation of the sources.

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The application of the comparative method for the analysis of IrE has been highly successful in that, for an overwhelming number of the non-standard phenomena, it has been possible to say with a good amount of certainty what their origin is. For example, it appears unambiguously clear that the *after*-perfect as well as subordinating *and* are due to influence from Irish. Equally, there is little doubt that multiple negation and *a*-prefixation are phenomena that have simply been passed on from earlier dialects of English and preserved in IrE.

In spite of the success of the comparative method in the study of IrE, it has also become clear over the past couple of years that there is an interesting and fruitful alternative to the traditional methodology. Rather than looking for the origin of the non-standard features of IrE in Irish or earlier dialects of English, it has been suggested that the specific properties of the contact situation itself may offer important clues for our understanding of some of these features. As is well known, the emergence of IrE is the result of a massive and fairly rapid shift of the originally Irish speaking population of Ireland to English and it appears intuitively plausible that this shifting situation – mainly due to imperfect learning, overgeneralisation, speaker creativity, pressure from linguistic universals, etc. – could have given rise to at least some of the morphosyntactic peculiarities of IrE. Such an approach will be in the centre of the subsequent discussion.

In concentrating on the language contact situation itself, the approach advocated here crucially draws on the results as well as the methodologies of language universals and grammaticalisation research mainly understood within the tradition of functionalism, but by no means excluding those linguistic universals discussed in formal models of grammars. The central idea to be explored in the following is that an unstable linguistic situation like the one found in Ireland during the shift from Irish to English, i.e. roughly between 1700 and 1900, will inevitably trigger the activation of linguistic universals in a sense to be made precise and spark off grammaticalisation processes. It is hoped that, by taking recourse to such notions and processes, the benefits of a universalist approach to the study of IrE can be demonstrated. It is not my aim in this paper to harm the reputation of the traditional methodology, but rather offer new insights into hitherto neglected phenomena or into those phenomena where the comparative method went into a deadlock.

The structure of the present paper is as follows. Section 2 will provide an overview of the major insights and the strong as well as the weak points of the retention/transfer debate. Section 3 will introduce the major tenets of the universalist approach advocated here and make some vital remarks on the methodology pursued. Some information regarding the empirical basis is offered in section 4. Section 5 will discuss two case studies that demonstrate the value of the universalist approach.

## 2. Retention versus Transfer

The traditional retention-versus-transfer-debate, in the following referred to as the ‘traditional approach,’ works on the assumption that – at least in principle – every linguistic phenomenon has a traceable history. As pointed out above, it shares this assumption with historical linguistics. In the same way as the comparative method of historical linguistics assumes that a proto-language or parent language can be entirely reconstructed from its daughter languages, the traditional approach assumes that the specific morphosyntactic properties of a contact variety like IrE should – at least in theory – be completely traceable to either earlier English dialects or Irish (*tertium non datur*).

The traditional approach, again as most of historical linguistics, is surface-oriented in the sense that what is compared and traced are surface forms per se and not the underlying structures, features, functional heads and the like. Surface orientation is explicitly mentioned in Filppula (1999: 53) who also characterises his own approach, which can be taken as typical of the field, as functional and pragmatic, stressing in particular the importance of the context of a linguistic form for recovering its meaning.

By way of illustration, consider the case of the well known *after*-perfect, where it appears clear beyond any doubt that the source of this construction in IrE is Irish (cf. (1)).

- (1) *Tell mother we are just after receiving Her letter*  
 ‘Tell mother we have just received her letter.’  
 (HCIEL)<sup>2</sup>

How do we know? The line of argumentation is simple in this case: Since a corresponding construction exists only in Irish, but not in earlier dialects of English, the conclusion seems inescapable that the construction of IrE was calqued on Irish (cf. (2)).

- (2) *Tá sé tar éis imeacht.*  
 is he after going  
 ‘He has just gone.’  
 (Ó Siadhail 1989: 297; Filppula 1999: 99)

We here encounter a first problem with the alleged surface orientation and also an important difference to historical linguistics, since what has been transferred from Irish to IrE is not a linguistic form, i.e. a morpheme, per se, but rather the function of a morpheme in Irish has been projected on an English morpheme. We can assume – without explicating how – that this transfer was possible, since *tar éis* and *after* shared important functional domains before the transfer.

<sup>2</sup> HCIEL = Hamburg Corpus of Irish Emigrant Letters  
 < [www.uni-hamburg.de/fachbereiche-einrichtungen/sfb538/projekth5.html](http://www.uni-hamburg.de/fachbereiche-einrichtungen/sfb538/projekth5.html) >

As a matter of fact, I have not been able, neither in the literature nor in our own data, to find a single instance of a direct loan from Irish into IrE. Although the borrowing of morphemes, particularly of grammatical morphemes, is otherwise an important diagnostic of rapid contact-induced language shift (Thomason 2001 a, 2001 b; Thomason and Kaufman 1988), in the contact situation between Irish and English it is conspicuously absent.<sup>3</sup>

Considering additional examples where Irish apparently has influenced the grammar of IrE, it turns out that the process of transfer must have been even more subtle and complicated. In a similar way to the *tar éis* construction, subordinating uses of *and*, like those illustrated in (3), can be conceived of as the transfer of a particular function from an Irish morpheme to an English morpheme (cf. (4)). Again, the reason why this transfer probably works is, because *agus* and *and* had some functional overlap before the contact. However, above and beyond the transfer of the subordinating function of *agus*, which in (3) and (4) is of a temporal type, subordinating *and* in (3) also inherited most of the non-finite syntax of the Irish construction. In other words, this case illustrates the transfer of a function from an Irish morpheme to an English morpheme including the transfer of a bundle of morphosyntactic properties.

- (3) *He fell and him crossing the bridge.*

‘He fell while he was crossing the bridge.’  
(Harris 1984: 305; Filppula 1999: 198)

- (4) *Thit sé agus é ag dul thar an droichead.*  
fell he and him at going over the bridge

‘He fell while he was crossing the bridge.’  
(Harris 1984: 305; Filppula 1999: 198)

While such influence from Irish on English is relatively complex, it by no means exhausts the possibilities of attested transfer. The example in (5) shows another much discussed non-standard construction of IrE – the so-called ‘medial object perfect’ –, where the difference with respect to standard English lies in the fact that the participle occurs after the direct object, and not adjacent to the auxiliary.

- (5) *He has a letter written.*

‘He has written a letter.’  
(Filppula 1999: 110)

In this case, influence from Irish has been suspected to stem from constructions like (6), which are roughly equivalent in meaning. Although there are obvious parallels between (5) and (6) – both are possessive constructions containing a secondary predication where the participle occurs behind the object Noun

<sup>3</sup> A noteworthy problem of this generalisation is the word *rapid*. The shift from Irish to English within 200-300 years seems quite rapid from a general European perspective, but is fairly long in comparison to shifts taking place within two or three generations.

Phrase (NP) –, again the alleged transfer from Irish to English must have been quite subtle, since the encoding of possessivity is realised by a locative construction in Irish and not by verb, as in English. Moreover, the Irish construction must be analysed as an extended passive construction, and not a perfect construction, since the main predicator is a form of the verb ‘be’ and the locative phrase *aige* ‘at him’ is optional.

- (6) *Tá litir scríobhtha aige*  
 is a letter written at him  
 ‘He has written a letter.’  
 (Filppula 1999: 110)

These remarks are not meant to discount influence from Irish in these and similar cases, but they clearly show that a considerable number of ‘cognitive steps’ are necessary to transfer the relative ordering of object NP and participle from an Irish construction like (6) to the English construction shown in (5).

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the fact that apart from transferring structure from Irish to English, there also appear to be examples where influence from Irish would more appropriately be characterised as negative transfer or loss of structure. The IrE examples in (7) and (8) show the omission of pronominal arguments in subject and object positions in a way that is strikingly different from standard English. As is well known, subject arguments in standard English may be omitted under coordination, but only if the omitted subject is co-referent with the subject of the preceding clause (cf. *They<sub>i</sub> married and Ø<sub>i</sub> had a baby*). These conditions are violated in (7) and (8), with (7) showing an omitted subject and (8) an omitted object both coreferent with a preceding object.

- (7) I expected him<sub>i</sub> in at Christmas time & his<sub>i</sub> Job was not finished & Ø<sub>i</sub> did not come.  
 (HCIEL)
- (8) But as I happened to take a walk up to south Boston I<sub>i</sub> met Michl. Corbot who invited me<sub>i</sub> to his House and kept Ø<sub>i</sub> for 8 days.  
 (HCIEL)

On the basis of evidence like (9) it has been suggested that such an omission of subject and object argument may also be due to contact effects (Pietsch 2004). If this claim could be shown to hold, this would mean that it is possible to transfer structural properties without there being any carrier morphemes involved.

- (9) *Bhuail sé buille don tuairgín ar an Olltach agus do mhairbh.*  
 hit he blow to the pounder on the Ulsterman and killed  
 ‘He<sub>i</sub> dealt a blow of the pounder to the Ulsterman<sub>i</sub>; and (he<sub>i</sub>) killed (him<sub>i</sub>).’  
 (Ó Siadhail 1989: 212)

Even though various other interesting cases could be discussed at this point, the foregoing discussion should have made clear that the explication and explanation of the actual transfer processes is an important challenge for the tradi-

tional approach, which, however, has been relatively parsimoniously addressed in the relevant literature. We can summarise for now that, although the traditional approach has been successful in identifying structural and functional correspondences between IrE and Irish/earlier dialects of English, academic interest has largely eschewed the *hows* and *whys* of the transfer processes.

In the remainder of this section, I would like to raise some additional problems where I think the traditional transfer/retention debate could be successfully extended and complemented.

In view of the fact that the traditional approach aims at reconstructing either transfer from Irish or retention from earlier dialects of English, the empirical scope of this approach is – almost by definition – restricted to those non-standard phenomena found in IrE for which a reconstruction is possible. This entails, however, that non-standard phenomena, for which no parallels have been found in either Irish or earlier dialects of English, must necessarily be left out of the discussion, since they could not advance it. This empirical confinement of the traditional approach would be insignificant, if such non-standard phenomena did not exist, but the data that I have been able to survey so far do not seem to warrant such an assumption. Among the non-standard phenomena for which a substratal or superstratal source is difficult to motivate are copula drop, double perfects, the use of infinitives instead of *ing*-forms and, most importantly for the subsequent discussion, the use of nominative pronouns as subjects of non-finite clauses (Pietsch *fc.*). Such occurrences of pronouns, as exemplified in (10), appear neither in Irish nor in earlier dialects of English. Evidently, the traditional method has very little to say about such pronouns.

- (10) My Sister Bridget stoped with her old Misses after I leaving.  
(HCIEL)

Another problem that has largely been neglected in the traditional paradigm concerns the question why particular morphosyntactic properties of Irish precisely did *not* get transferred, whereas others apparently did. The preceding research work leaves us with a somewhat unbalanced picture, since influence from Irish has been detected and successfully argued for in various subtle grammatical domains. However, once we remind ourselves of the fact that, in other domains of grammar Irish and English differ radically and ostentatiously from one another, this sets oneself asking why the contact situation did not produce any influence – or at least some traces thereof – in these domains. For the purpose of illustration, notice that English and Irish differ substantially in the word order of basic declarative sentences, which is SVO in English, but VSO in Irish. Additional examples of profound grammatical differences between the two languages are certainly not difficult to find (marking of possession, interrogative clauses, etc.), but none of them has led to noticeable influence of Irish on English.

In the same manner, we may ask if some structural elements of earlier English dialects – or earlier Irish dialects for that matter – were lost as a result of the contact situation. This question is highly important from the perspective of con-

tact linguistics, since it has repeatedly been observed that marked structural components are lost during contact situations, i.e. complexity is normally reduced.<sup>4</sup> One explanation that has been proposed for the reduction of complexity is that marked features are harder to learn than unmarked features. Since we can assume extensive bilingualism and imperfect learning in the history of IrE, it should appear promising to look for areas in the grammar of IrE where complexity was reduced.

Apart from the problems addressed in the preceding paragraphs, which I consider the most important ones and where future work on IrE appears most promising, there are also a few less consequential points which, nevertheless, deserve mentioning.

The first point concerns the psycholinguistic basis of the transfer processes (cf. Carroll 2001). The initial paragraphs of the current sections, as well as the examples contained therein ((1) – (9)), made it clear that the observed transfer from Irish to English can be of different kinds. Even more types of transfer can probably be distinguished. Yet it appears inconsistent and somewhat unsatisfactory to say *that* transfer of a certain kind occurred without explaining *how* this transfer happened. In other words, the basis of the transfer, which may lie in principles of language acquisition, needs to be specified.

The second point pertains to the level of linguistic analysis at which parallels between Irish and English are identified and hence transfer is postulated. Much recent work, including my own work, assumes influence on the surface, although the underlying structures (deep structure) are quite different. Recall the notorious case of the medial object perfect in (5) and (6), where in English and Irish possession is encoded by a verb and a locative construction respectively. In my opinion, the traditional approach ought to take these differences more seriously.

Another problem that is typically evaded in the discussion of IrE, but which has been topicalised several times by Tristram (cf. Tristram 2002), is that besides transfer from Irish to English it also appears plausible that there has been transfer from English to Irish. Such transfer could incur serious complications since, in principle, it is possible that English influenced Irish and that the modified Irish subsequently influenced English. At the moment I cannot see how to deal with this undeterminable factor. An additional variable in the calculation is the dialectal variation of Irish and English. Even though the territory where Irish and English met and still meet is relatively small, due to dialectal variation the languages that came into contact were certainly not homogeneous. And clearly, IrE is not either.

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<sup>4</sup> Recently it has been argued that, contrary to traditional assumptions, language contact may also lead to diversification and complexification (Comrie and Kuteva 2004).

### 3. *The Universalist Approach: Basic Concepts*

The approach to the analysis of IrE that will be argued for in the following to complement the traditional transfer/retention debate is here referred to as the ‘universalist approach’ which, as this label suggests, takes the insights, generalisations as well as the methodologies of language typology, grammaticalisation theory and also universal grammar, as formulated within generative grammar, as basis and background for the analysis of IrE. This approach has proved fruitful for the synchronic and diachronic analysis of English in that it offers a perspective on the English language that allows us to identify those properties that are cross-linguistically relevant and not idiosyncratic in this respect. Moreover, and even more important, cross-linguistic, universalist work has identified various implicational connections between different grammatical phenomena as well as general paths of development of grammatical markers.

To be fair, it would not be appropriate to claim that the approach advocated here had not caught the attention of renowned specialists of IrE. At various places in the literature we find hints pointing out the potential and the significance of the universalist approach, as evidenced by the following quotation:<sup>5</sup>

Research based on linguistic universals in one sense or another is another fresh dimension of HE [Hiberno-English] studies, which has been inspired by the advances made in the last few decades in general linguistic theory. The perspectives opened up by this line of inquiry are potentially vast, not least because of the many different types of universals discussed in the literature. (Filppula 1999: 26)

Nevertheless, with the exception of a few scholars, notably Corrigan (1993), Guilfoyle (1986), Henry (1995), Hickey (1995, 1997) and McCafferty (2003), these perspectives have not been seriously investigated. Moreover, by shifting the research focus to contact-induced effects that can neither be analysed as retentions nor as transfers, the line of inquiry followed up here is probably quite unique.

While the universalist approach pursued here certainly represents a challenging adventure, before embarking on it, it is necessary to take a closer look at the contact situation between Irish and English to see whether this particular contact situation is amenable to a study of this kind.

The main period of Irish-English language contact between approximately 1700 and 1900 represents a classic situation of language shift, since during that period the majority of native speakers of Irish shifted to English. The linguistic situation in Ireland during that period is relatively well documented. The information from various censuses documents the rapid decline of Irish speakers (Ó Cuív 1971: appendix 77-95, maps; Hindley 1990; Kallen 1994) although, since the main aim of these censuses was not the documentation of the linguistic situation and since the assessment of the linguistic situation of a shifting country is a very complicated matter, we have to approach these data with a pinch of salt. The English of that period of massive shift is documented through letters, petitions and similar pieces of writing (cf. Miller, et al. 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See Kallen (1997: 4) for a quotation similar in spirit.



According to Thomason (2001 a), it is typical of language shift situations that there is a high number of bilinguals as well as a high degree of imperfect learning. In such situations of language shift, we can expect many structural interferences, but few lexical borrowings. Structural interferences tend to affect phonology and syntax first, while the morphological component of a language apparently resists contact-induced effects for a relatively long time. The more rapid the shift of a group of speakers from their native language to a new language proceeds, the more structural interferences can be expected.

The shifting situation in Ireland between ca. 1700 and 1900 seems to match many of the general characteristics of language shift discussed in Thomason (2001 b). IrE shows various structural interferences from Irish, but there are few to none lexical borrowings. In view of the relatively rapid shift from Irish to English by most of the population, the assumption of widespread imperfect learning appears plausible. Moreover, we can assume that various well known mechanisms of contact-induced language change, like code-switching, code-alternation, diverse first and second language acquisition strategies, were widespread among the shifting population and played an important role in the shaping of IrE. Provided that these general assumptions about the contact situation between Irish and English as well as the mechanisms at work in this situation are correct, it would appear natural to follow that more than simply transfer and retention must have played a role during the emergence of IrE. Consequently, one would expect that the contact situation itself left linguistic traces in IrE and, as long as one does not discount cross-linguistically stable principles and patterns, one would also expect that the traces left by the contact situation are not accidental.

Having said that, I would like to hasten to add that I do not wish to analyse IrE on a par with Pidgin and Creole languages for whose genesis the influence of linguistic universals has been extensively discussed, particularly with respect to the so-called Bioprogram Hypothesis (Bickerton 1980, 1981, 2001). Most certainly, IrE is not a Pidgin language, nor can it be analysed as a Creole since the crucial social and linguistic conditions for the emergence of such languages are not met. Equally, it is impossible to bring IrE in the vicinity of bilingual mixed languages like Michif, Ma'a, Media Lengua and the like, since IrE does not contain complete grammatical subsystems of Irish (Thomason 1997, 2001 b).

If it is correct to assume that more than transfer and retention were at stake in the formation of IrE and that this *more* can be adequately captured and explained by linguistic universals, it becomes necessary to say something about the types of universals supposed to be involved and how we imagine them to work.

Current research on linguistic universals distinguishes between mainly two types of universals. On the one hand, we find typological universals in the tradition of Joseph Greenberg (Greenberg 1963), which first of all are inductively established generalisations about structural properties of languages based on a representative sample of languages, but which nevertheless are supposed to be universal. Much discussed and well established universals of that kind are impli-

cational universals like *If the basic word order of a language is VO, it has prepositions* or *If the basic word order of a language is OV, it has postpositions*. On the other hand, such typological universals contrast with the concept of linguistic universals assumed in Noam Chomsky's universal grammar, which represents a system of abstract principles and a specific genetic endowment of the human species (Newmeyer 1998). Evidence for the existence of such universals is, *inter alia*, the acquisition of languages, particularly as first languages, which is surprisingly fast and successful in spite of highly underspecified and deficient primary data.

Both concepts of universals have in common that they restrict the space of linguistic variation, i.e. not all logically possible languages and linguistic structures are admitted. There are fundamental differences with respect to the cognitive embedding of the universals as well as the assumptions, as to how they operate. Linguistic universals in the understanding of universal grammar are conceptualised as a genetic disposition and operate primarily during first language acquisition in that they restrict the hypotheses of the learning child (Haider 2001). Typological universals are observable restrictions in the architecture of languages, which are a function of the human linguistic processor and possibly more general cognitive processes (economy, iconicity, frequency, markedness). One of the most convincing examples given so far to explicate the relationship between typological universals and processing principles is Hawkins (1994, 2001), who proposes a strong connection between Greenberg's word order principles and processing preferences of the human parser for strictly left-branching and right-branching structures.

For the study of IrE, it appears most promising to work with both concepts of universals. It appears plausible to assume that it frequently happened in the contact situation of Irish and English, particularly within families, that children in the acquisition of English as their first language were confronted with deficient primary data, mainly by speakers – often their parents – who themselves had no native competence in English. In such situations, deficient primary data could have been compensated by universal grammar. On the other hand it also appears plausible that in such a contact situation speakers primarily select or filter out the 'economical' or 'optimal' structures from the contact languages. In the context of IrE, this scenario seems particularly convincing for speakers who learnt English as their second language. For the explanation of some phenomena, it may even be necessary to fall back on both concepts of universals.

#### 4. *Empirical Basis*

Before introducing and discussing two case studies that will illustrate and exemplify the aforementioned theoretical discussion, a few brief remarks concerning the empirical basis are in order. As is well known, the major language shift from Irish to English occurred in the period from about 1700 to 1900. Incidentally, this is also the period when Ireland saw a mass exodus to the New World,

particularly North America and Australia, due to severe labour and food shortage in the island. This emigration process has provided us with an important and highly useful source to evaluate the linguistic situation during that period, since an extensive exchange of letters set in between the emigrants and their relatives back in Ireland. Many of these letters have been preserved, either in private collections, libraries or public archives, and can be accessed for linguistic studies.<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, choosing emigrant letters for the study of the shifting situation has proved useful before (Montgomery 1992; Filppula 1999; Fritz 1998, 2000 a, 2000 b; McCafferty 2003, 2004). In addition, such material has successfully been used in sociological and historical studies (Miller, et al. 2003).

For the purposes of the present study a corpus of Irish emigrant letters has been compiled that contains approximately 250,000 words and feeds a relational database.<sup>7</sup> The corpus contains mostly letters, but also some diary notes, petitions and similar text types. The writers of these texts mostly belong to the lower strata of society and write an English that is strongly dialectally coloured.

The following table provides an overview of the corpus. Notice that it is still growing and will reach an estimated size of about 300,000 words.<sup>8</sup>

Period	Words	Texts	Location	Words	Texts
before 1800	26145	35	Ulster	119559	224
1800-1849	58528	114	Con.	10050	19
1850-1899	139200	238	Leinster	37219	65
after 1900	11488	57	Munster	46270	81
unclass.	1405	11	unclass.	23668	66
total	236766	455	total	236766	455

The database contains information concerning the sources of the texts, the writers as well as the time and the location of writing. There is a catalogue of the non-standard grammatical phenomena of IrE (about eighty) that have been observed in the data as well as an associated list of example sentences illustrating them.

Although the corpus cannot claim representativeness and is certainly not elaborate enough for doing sophisticated sociolinguistic analyses, it has nevertheless enough substance for the kind of qualitative investigation pursued here. The subsequent section will illustrate the usefulness of the corpus of emigrant letters by discussing two case studies.

<sup>6</sup> For example: Public Record Office for Northern Ireland, Irish National Archives, University of Melbourne Archives, State Library of Victoria (Australia), New York Historical Society (NYC, NY, USA) as well as various others.

<sup>7</sup> Lukas Pietsch, Susanne Flach and Meredith Davies take full credit for the compilation of the corpus and for building up the database. Lukas Pietsch collected important material for the corpus during a research stay in Belfast and Dublin in 2004.

<sup>8</sup> It is apparent from this table that letters written by writers from Ulster are overrepresented. This reflects the simple fact that more documents are available from this region, which is probably due to a higher rate of literacy in comparison to other parts of Ireland.

## 5. Two Case Studies

The two problems or phenomena of IrE to be discussed in what follows are taken from the domains of tense/aspect marking and the distribution of nominative pronouns. As for tense/aspect marking, I will specifically address the well-known problem of the so-called medial object perfect, i.e. the perfect construction with transitive verbs where the object occurs before the perfect participle, and show that this construction underwent a cross-linguistically significant process of grammaticalisation in IrE which can be analysed as an immediate result of the contact situation. Concerning the distribution of nominative pronouns the subsequent discussion will show that IrE possesses a unique distribution of such pronouns as subjects of non-finite clauses, which as such exists neither in earlier dialects of English, nor in standard English, nor in Irish. This phenomenon is extremely suggestive of an independent development in the genesis of IrE due to language contact. The discussion mainly draws on Pietsch (2005 a, 2005 b) and Siemund (2004).

### 5.1. Medial Object Perfects

Medial object perfects are constructions like those illustrated in (11) and (12), where the *have* + *participle* construction familiar from standard English is split up by an object in the case of transitive verbs (Filppula 1999; Greene 1979; Harris 1993; Ó Sé 1992).

- (11) *They have a local pub bought there.*

‘They have bought a local pub there.’  
(Filppula 1999: 107)

- (12) *She’s nearly her course finished.*

‘She has nearly finished her course.’  
(Harris 1991: 202)

As I have argued in Siemund (2004), it is not plausible to assume that this construction is a transfer from Irish into English, since it is well attested in other and earlier dialects of English. Moreover, as pointed out in section 2, the Irish construction that is sometimes assumed to be the model for the English construction is a passive-cum-possessive construction where possessivity is expressed by a locative phrase. Consider again example (6) repeated as (13).

- (13) *Tá litir scríobhtha aige.*  
is a letter written at him

‘He has written a letter’  
(Filppula 1999: 110)

This is not to deny that the Irish construction may have played some indirect role, but a direct transfer can most certainly be ruled out.<sup>9</sup>

Building on work by Filppula (1999), Pietsch (2005 b) convincingly argues that the retention analysis cannot be kept in its most simple form either and needs to be modified, since medial object perfects were nearly obsolete when the colonisation of Ireland started, so that it is equally implausible to assume that they were simply retained. What apparently did exist in the varieties of the colonisers was a construction which – though identical in form to medial object perfects – had a more restricted meaning. Some examples are provided in (14) through (16).

(14) We have some good brick Houses erected ... (HCIEL)

(15) Johney has it hung up in his own room ... (HCIEL)

(16) Dear Maria we have you and your husband likeness and baby framed. (HCIEL)

The semantic structure of this construction is best described as a double predication. Firstly, there is a relation of possessivity holding between the subject NP and the object NP, or between their referents for that matter, which is expressed by the verb *have*. Secondly, the perfect participle also predicates the object NP and together with it forms what has in some frameworks been referred to as a ‘small clause.’ The generalised semantic structure of such double predications looks as in (17); a translation of (14) into this structure can be found in (18).

(17) HAVE(x, y) & P(y)

(18) HAVE(we, some good brick houses) & ERECTED(some good brick houses)

Pietsch (2005 b) describes the meaning of such constructions as static-possessive, since the verb *have* (still) expresses a true relation of possessivity and the perfect participle indicates a permanent result state of the referent of the object NP. In terms of its meaning, Pietsch (2005 b) claims, this construction corresponds to a similar construction of Modern English, where *have* occurs in combination with *got*. Example (19) nicely illustrates both possessive and resultative meaning of this construction.

(19) “I’ve got the letter written,” Harry said, holding it up and tossing it to Ron who had Fielding. “I’m sure they’ll get it just before they leave, so they’ll be late.”

(Harry Potter and the Rise of Terror,<sup>10</sup>  
<[www.fictionalley.org/authors/solidorange13/HPATROT02.html](http://www.fictionalley.org/authors/solidorange13/HPATROT02.html)>)

<sup>9</sup> Tristram (pc.) points out that the Irish construction in (13) may in fact be due to influence from English since it did not exist in Old or Middle Irish and has no parallels in Welsh or Breton.

<sup>10</sup> Note that J.K. Rowling uses ‘Scotticisms,’ as she writes in Standard Scottish English.

Pietsch (2005 b) goes on to hypothesise that static-possessive resultative constructions of the type shown in (15) – (16) form the starting point of a grammaticalisation process in IrE, at the end of which these constructions come to be used as true perfects, i.e. they are interpreted as expressing pre-time to the moment of utterance as well as current relevance. Such a process of grammaticalisation has been observed in various unrelated languages (cf. Bybee and Dahl 1989; Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca 1994; Brinton 1988; Dahl 2000) and hence cross-linguistic studies lend support to the scenario argued for here. Examples of such grammaticalised medial object perfects can be found in (20) and (21).

(20) As for our baby we have not it christened yet. (HCIEL)

(21) he had the landlord shot (Filppula 1999: 108)<sup>11</sup>

Additional support for the grammaticalisation hypothesis can be drawn from observing the frequencies of occurrence of medial object perfects and the static-possessive resultative construction both over time and across different regions of Ireland. Moreover, the two constructions show typical patterns of co-occurrence with other grammatical features of IrE, which potentially says something about their development.

As far as their frequencies of occurrence are concerned, the data taken from our corpus show an increase in the use of medial object perfects over time, whereas the text frequency of resultative constructions remains relatively stable in the same period. This is suggestive of the fact that medial object perfects develop after and on the basis of resultative constructions. In addition, medial object perfects are particularly prominent with Catholic informants from the south of Ireland. Pietsch (2005 b) interprets these findings in such a way that the grammaticalisation process leading from resultative constructions to medial object perfects must be related to the contact with Irish.

Concerning co-occurrence patterns with other grammatical phenomena typical of IrE, it turns out that medial object perfects are predominantly used by speakers whose language exhibits traces of Irish influence, such as subordinating use of *and* (*John came by and he going to the diggings*), free periphrastic *do* (*to you I do address this letter*), Irish phrasal loans (*it turned to a fever on him*), resultative past tense (*there's no rain, all the rivers went dry*), unbound *self*-forms (*he considers myself his friend*) as well as some others. Conversely, the linguistic profiles of the speakers who do not have the medial object perfect in their varieties show various marks of archaic dialectal English, including phenomena like copula drop (*it Ø a good thing*), a-prefixing (*it is a-waiting*), zero plurals (*I went for two mile-Ø*), zero subject relatives (*they lost all Ø was theirs*), demonstrative *them* (*I have them woods sold*), etc.

From the universalist perspective adopted here, these findings are important for two reasons. Firstly, there is a specific grammaticalisation process running

<sup>11</sup> Note that this example does not have the causative meaning, but is equivalent to 'he had shot the landlord.'

through the history of IrE, and it does not seem too far-fetched to assume that the instability inherent in the contact situation either sparked off this process or at least accelerated it considerably. Secondly, and maybe even more importantly, it is probably no coincidence that the static-possessive resultative construction was so widespread at the beginning of the contact situation. Pietsch (2005 b) proposes two factors for its widespread occurrence. On the one hand, the Irish construction in (13) that comes closest to the English construction in terms of its formal features also has a static-possessive or static-resultative meaning. This semantic parallel may have fostered the use of the English construction. On the other hand, the static-possessive resultative construction is more iconic than the medial object perfect in the sense that the two propositions expressed (recall (17)) find corresponding formal correlates. Since iconic structures require fewer processing capacities than non-iconic structures, so the argument goes, this facilitated the use and the spread of the static-possessive resultative construction.

Provided this line of reasoning is correct, medial object perfects of IrE would appear to be a convincing example of contact-induced grammaticalisation in the sense of Heine and Kuteva (2003, 2005), who propose that, in a contact situation, speakers may replicate a grammaticalisation process they reconstruct to have taken place in the language with which they are in contact – the model language in Heine and Kuteva’s terminology. The complete description of this process of replica grammaticalisation runs as follows:

Contact-induced Grammaticalisation (Heine and Kuteva 2003, 2005)

- a. Speakers notice that in language **M** (Irish) there is a grammatical category **Mx** (Irish Perfect).
- b. They create an equivalent category **Rx** (Medial Object Perfect) in language **R** (English), using material available in **R**.
- c. To this end, they replicate a grammaticalisation process they assume to have taken place in language **M**, using an analogical formula of the kind (**My** > **Mx**) : (**Ry** > **Rx**).
- d. They grammaticalise **Ry** (Resultative Perfect) to **Rx** (Medial Object Perfect).

To be sure, what needs to be shown in order to make the IrE medial object perfect a fully convincing example of contact-induced grammaticalisation is that the Irish construction illustrated in (13) above underwent a grammaticalisation process from resultative construction to perfect as well. Moreover, this model process must have occurred before or at least simultaneously to the replication process in (Irish) English. According to Pietsch (2005 b), such evidence is indeed available.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For example, the Irish sentence *Tá mo dhinneár ite agam* (lit.: ‘is my dinner eaten at me’) is structurally equivalent to example (13) above, but differs from it in that the NP *my dinner* is not strictly possessed by the referent encoded in the PP. Hence, there is a shift from resultative construction to perfect.

## 5.2. Nominative Subject Pronouns in Non-finite Clauses

If it is true that the development of medial object perfects represents a convincing example of the usefulness of the universalist approach for the study of IrE, the topic of nominative pronouns as subjects of non-finite clauses should be even more convincing. Consider (22):

- (22) If a an Irishman goes to drive horses or Bullocks here after he comming out from home, he might ... (HCIEL)

Such occurrences of nominative pronouns are a challenging topic in so far as they can be analysed neither as a case of transfer nor retention, since corresponding uses of pronouns neither exist in Irish nor in earlier dialects of English. This suggests very strongly that they must be a result of the contact situation. A first treatment of this topic is given in Pietsch (2005 a), but since this topic has not been dealt with before, it is too early to expect a satisfactory analysis.

As is well known, standard English does not mark case distinctions on full NPs and only has a binary contrast between nominative and accusative or subjective case and objective case in the system of personal pronouns.<sup>13</sup> Although nominative and accusative case forms mostly occur in complementary distribution, there are various syntactic environments where complementarity breaks down, maybe not in formal written language, but certainly in dialects and informal registers, and accusative forms appear instead of nominative forms, at least from the point of view of prescriptive grammar. Prominent environments for accusative forms to occur in ‘against the rules’ proposed by prescriptive grammars are predicative complements (23) and complex coordinated NPs (24).

- (23) it was him, this is me, etc.

- (24) Me and Mary are going abroad for a holiday.<sup>14</sup>

As far as Irish is concerned, we can equally distinguish between two series of personal pronouns that roughly and by no means completely correspond to the distinction between nominative and accusative case, or subjective and objective case for that matter, but which in the relevant handbooks are assigned the labels ‘conjunctive’ and ‘disjunctive’ respectively (Ó Siadhail 1989). The conjunctive forms of the third person are *sé* (3SgM), *sí* (3SgF) and *siad* (3Pl), the corresponding disjunctive forms are *é*, *í* and *iad*.<sup>15</sup> As can be gathered from the table below, a formal contrast between conjunctive and disjunctive forms exists only in the third person.

<sup>13</sup> I disregard the genitive case, since forms like *my*, *your*, etc. are better analysed as possessive determiners.

<sup>14</sup> My word processor does not like this example and tells me to watch the pronoun use.

<sup>15</sup> Note that the conjunctive forms are identical to the disjunctive forms minus a prefixed particle *s-*.



		1	2	3
sg.	conjunct	mé	tú	sé (m), sí (f)
	disjunct	mé	tú	é (m), í (f)
pl.	conjunct	sinn	sibh	siad
	disjunct	sinn	sibh	iad

The distribution of the third person forms is simple in so far as *sé*, *sí* and *siad* only occur as subjects of finite verbs and in a position immediately adjacent to the verb. For all other positions, the disjunctive forms are used, which thus can be analysed as the unmarked forms – both in terms of morphological substance and distribution.<sup>16</sup> It follows that disjunctive pronouns also occur as subjects of non-finite clauses (Verbal Noun construction), as shown in (25).

- (25) *B'fhearr leis iad a fhanacht*  
 was better with him them waiting  
 'He would prefer for them to wait.'

Although, as shown above, the conjunctive and disjunctive forms of Irish do not neatly correspond to the subjective and objective forms of English, in terms of their distribution the disjunctive forms still come closest to English object pronouns. Judging simply by surface similarities, there thus seem to be no significant differences between Irish and standard English in the distribution of pronominal subjects in non-finite clauses (cf. (26)).

- (26) Jack hates her to miss the train. / Jack hates her missing the train.

What is puzzling about IrE in this context is that this variety allows the use of nominative or subjective forms in the subject position of non-finite clauses. To be sure, the puzzlement arises only relative to the facts of standard English, since we should expect subject pronouns to occur in subject positions anyway. It is only due to case assignment of the matrix verb (Exceptional Case Marking (ECM), accusative plus infinitive (a.c.i.)) or the gerund, as has frequently been argued, that the subject of the non-finite clause appears in a non-nominative case. Thus, speakers of IrE do something that would naturally fall out as a default case from traditional and also modern theories of grammar.<sup>17</sup> The (preliminary) analyses proposed below can be understood as refinements of this more general point.

Subject pronouns in non-finite environments are particularly prominent and widespread with subordinate non-finite clauses introduced by a preposition (27), complement clauses (28), object clauses of prepositional verbs (29) as well as object clauses of simple verbs (30).

<sup>16</sup> The disjunctive forms also occur as subjects of copula clauses, which makes clear that it would not be justified to equate them with the object pronouns of English.

<sup>17</sup> I would like to thank Ruth Kempson (pc.) for pointing out to me this rather obvious fact.

- (27) My Sister Bridget stoped with her old Misses after I leaving. (HCIEL)
- (28) I [...] would have written an answer to you ere now were it not for I being paying Michl. Moores passage as required by you. (HCIEL)
- (29) uncles & aunt was very much disappointed in in she not coming. (HCIEL)
- (30) I heard she being in this place I went to see her directly. (HCIEL)

The common denominator of these clauses is that they are non-finite and contain nominative pronominal subjects. In view of the fact that standard English as well as earlier dialects of English require the use of accusative or objective forms in these contexts, the phenomenon illustrated in (27) through (30) identifies a morpho-syntactic peculiarity of IrE that is completely unrelated to other varieties of English. Moreover, since the corresponding syntactic contexts of Irish require the use of the disjunctive forms, it is equally implausible to try to relate this phenomenon to the Irish substrate, at least not directly. In sum, neither the transfer nor the retention scenario can account for the occurrence of these pronominal forms. The distribution of 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronominal forms in Irish, English and IrE is summarised in the following table.

	Irish	English	Irish English
fin. subject	conjunctive	nominative	nominative
object	disjunctive	accusative	accusative
predicative	disjunctive	nom./acc.	accusative
coordination	disjunctive	nom./acc.	accusative
non-fin. subject	disjunctive	accusative	nominative (!)

Although it is too early to present a fully convincing analysis of this problem, a few preliminary considerations are possible. To begin with, the problem may successfully be treated within markedness theory such that the employment of nominative pronouns comes to be the result of a kind of default strategy speakers fall back on during instable linguistic settings like the contact situation under discussion here. Such an analysis presupposes that the nominative case can be considered as the unmarked case – a position that has frequently been defended in typological studies (Croft 1990). In hierarchies of case marking, we typically find the nominative in top position.

As far as present day English is concerned, it appears quite convincing to argue that the nominative pronouns are the unmarked members of the opposition formed by nominative and accusative pronouns. Without going into details, notice that the accusative forms have – at least on average – slightly more phonological substance than the nominative forms, which is one of the criteria frequently discussed in markedness theory. Another argument for showing that one form of a binary opposition is unmarked with respect to the other is the relative frequency of occurrence. On the assumption that unmarked forms are more frequent than the corresponding marked forms, a search through the British National Corpus yields the results shown in the following table, where it is indeed

the case that the nominative forms outnumber the accusative forms – depending on the form considered by factor three to seven – and hence represent the unmarked members of this case opposition.<sup>18</sup>

nominative	#	accusative	#	ratio
I	869,460	me	131,451	≈ 7 : 1
he	640,736	him	153,653	≈ 4 : 1
we	351,032	us	76,351	≈ 5 : 1
they	420,427	them	167,397	≈ 3 : 1

Provided that it is justified to generalise from these contemporary data to historical and dialectal data, we can conjecture that the nominative forms were more frequent and thus more salient for the speakers in the contact situation. It may be possible that speakers picked the nominative forms for this simple reason. In the use of nominative forms as subjects of non-finite clauses, a somewhat more elaborate explanation might try to identify yet another case of iconic motivation: In using these forms, speakers chose a highly salient form for the expression of the most salient grammatical relation.

Pietsch (2005 a) offers a more precise analysis in terms of these markedness relations arguing that even though the occurrence of subject pronouns in non-finite clauses is quite puzzling in IrE, there are nevertheless two facts that these pronouns have in common with the disjunctive forms that appear in the corresponding non-finite clauses of Irish. Firstly, the disjunctive forms are the unmarked member of an opposition in the same way as the nominative forms of English are. Secondly, there is no evidence that the disjunctive forms in Irish non-finite clauses, as in (25) above, need to be licenced by exceptional case marking or some similar mechanism. This, however, means that the subject pronouns occurring in non-finite clauses in IrE can also be understood in terms of a transfer – from Irish into English – of markedness relations or a transfer of case marking conditions. Provided these analyses are correct, it appears that what superficially looks like a case of contact-induced innovation could eventually turn out to be a case of transfer, albeit of a relatively subtle kind.

## 6. Summary and Conclusion

In spite of the preliminary nature of the foregoing discussion, I hope to have been able to show that the universalist approach is a compelling alternative to the traditional approach that deserves further attention. Of course, it will never replace the traditional methodology, since abandoning the latter would deprive us of a valuable tool for reconstructing the sources of transfer during a language contact situation. Nevertheless, the universalist approach can help us to decide

<sup>18</sup> I excluded the second person pronouns from the counts, since there are no formal distinctions, equally the third person neuter forms and the third person feminine forms, because the form *her* can be either possessive or objective.

the cases where the traditional methodology is trapped and postulates transfer as well as retention. Moreover, it allows us to focus our attention on phenomena that are beyond an explanation in terms of transfer or retention.

To be sure, I have been able to make only very limited use of the explanatory power of the universalist approach within the confines of this article, basically arguing in terms of markedness theory and iconic motivation. There are certainly other universal generalisations and principles that can be drawn on. What I personally find most promising for future work are the results of language acquisition studies, either of first or second language acquisition. This is for three reasons: First of all, I believe that a situation of language shift like the shift from Irish to English necessarily involves bilingualism, imperfect learning, code-switching and mixing, etc., i.e. phenomena that are of central interest to language acquisition studies. Secondly, it may be the case that many of the so-called language universals in the end turn out to be universals of language acquisition, or at least be based upon them. And thirdly, language acquisition is a process that we can observe and study every day. Since human cognition has not changed over the past 500 years, maybe not even over the past 50,000 years, the language acquisition strategies and processes observable today must be comparable to the ways humans acquired languages hundreds and thousands of years ago. Language acquisition thus can offer us a valuable window into the past and help us to reconstruct past situations of language contact and language shift.

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