THE WELSH OF JESUS AND JOB: VERB-SECOND IN MIDDLE WELSH

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1. Introduction

Welsh has always been a VSO language with the verb before the subject in all kinds of finite clause. However, in Middle Welsh, positive declarative main clauses normally show verb-second order with a phrase of some kind preceding the finite verb (all examples are taken from Willis 1998 or Meelen 2016):

(1) A   'r   guyrda   a   doethant   y gyt.
     and the nobles PRT come.PAST.3P together
     'And the nobles came together.'

(2) a   r   llall   a   adawd   yghyfeir   y   vorwyn.
     and   the other PRT leave.PAST.3S for   the maiden
     'and the rest he left for the maiden.'

(3) Ac yn   diannot   y   doeth   tan o   'r nef.
     and PRED immediate PRT come.PAST.3S fire from the heaven
     'And without delay came fire from the sky.'

These are traditionally known as abnormal sentences and are a feature of Welsh Bible translations, dating from the late Middle Welsh period. As Meelen (2016: 1) notes, quoting Evans (1990), the result was that

> [t]o many people in Wales it was utterly embarrassing to hear "Jesus and Job speaking 'bad Welsh'".

In (1) above, the verb agrees with the preceding subject, which is a topic. This is unexpected given that agreement in Middle Welsh as in Modern Welsh generally only occurs with pronouns. Contrasting with (1) are so-called mixed sentences such as (4), in which the initial constituent is focused:

(4) Mi a   'e   heirch.
     I   PRT 3FS seek.3S
     '(It is) I who ask for her.'

Here, there is no agreement even though the initial NP, which is understood as a subject, is a pronoun. In negative main clauses the verb is usually only preceded by the negative particle *ny*:

(5) Ny   welei   ef y   twrwf   rac tywyllet   y   nos.
     NEG see.PAST.3S he the commotion as darkness   the night
     'He could not see the commotion as the night was so black.'

Similarly, in interrogative clauses, it is only preceded by the interrogative particle *a*:

(6) A   wydyat   llad   a   chledyf?
     QU-PRT know.PRES.2S   kill.INF with   sword
     'Do you know how to kill with a sword?'

In an imperative such as the following, the imperative verb is in initial position with nothing preceding:

(7) Dos   titheu   ar Arthur y   diwyn   dy   wallt.
     go.IPV.2S   you   to Arthur to cut.INF   2S   hair
     'Go to Arthur to cut your hair.'

Three main questions arise here: (i) What is the nature of the Middle Welsh verb-second requirement? (ii) Why do verbs agree with a preceding subject which is a topic? (iii) Why do verbs not agree with a preceding subject which is focused?

2. Mixed (or cleft) sentences

The third question is the most straightforward. So-called mixed sentences survive in Modern Welsh, in which they are often called cleft sentences. As Borsley (2015, 2020) shows, their basic properties can be accounted for on the assumption that the initial constituent is not a filler but one term of a hidden identity predication. An English example like 'I am the author of the paper' shows that the two terms of such a predication do not have to have the same value for person. Hence, there is no reason within this approach for the gap within the second constituent to have the same value for person as the initial constituent. As in Modern Welsh, the hidden identity predication can be negated, as shown in (8):

(8) Nyt y   dyn a   doeth.
     NEG the man PRT come.3S
     'It was not the man who came.'

Meelen (2016: 119) notes that early Middle Welsh clefts had a form of the copula preceding the focused constituent, as in (9):

(9) Ys   mi a   'e   heirch.
     be.PRES.1SG me PRT 3SGF seek.3SG
     'It is I who seeks her'

It seems, then, that the identity interpretation originally stemmed from a lexical element but subsequently became a property of the construction.

Although the initial constituent of a cleft is not a filler, clefts share properties with head–filler-phrases such as *wh*-interrogatives. Both have two daughters, a phrase and a clause with a non-empty SLASH value. This can be captured by treating them as two subtypes of a type *binary-slashed-head-phrase*, subject to the following constraint:

$$(10)\ \textit{binary-slashed-head-phrase} \Rightarrow \begin{bmatrix} \text{SS} \begin{bmatrix} \text{SLASH [1]} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{HD} - \text{DTR [2]} \\ \text{DTRS L} \oplus < \text{[2]} \begin{bmatrix} \textit{clause} \\ \text{SS} \begin{bmatrix} \text{BIND \{[3]\}} \\ \text{SLASH \{[3]\}} \cup \text{[1]} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} > \end{bmatrix}$$

The BIND feature is rather like feature of the same name in Bouma *et al*. (2001) and picks out one member of the SLASH set of a daughter (typically the only member) for some kind of special treatment. Any other members form the SLASH set of the mother. For clefts, we can propose this constraint:

$$(11)\ \textit{cleft-clause} \Rightarrow \begin{bmatrix} \text{SS|LOC} \begin{bmatrix} \text{CONT} \begin{bmatrix} \text{QUANTS} < \begin{bmatrix} \textit{the} - \textit{rel} \\ \text{INDEX [1]} \\ \text{RESTR \{[2]\}} \end{bmatrix} > \oplus \text{L} \\ \text{NUCL} \begin{bmatrix} \textit{identity} - \textit{rel} \\ \text{ARG1 [3]} \\ \text{ARG2 [1]} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{DTRS} < \begin{bmatrix} \text{SS|LOC|CONT [INDEX [3]]} \end{bmatrix}, \\ \begin{bmatrix} \text{SS} \begin{bmatrix} \text{LOC} \begin{bmatrix} \text{CAT|HEAD|VFORM } \textit{fin} \\ \text{CONT [2]} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{BIND \{[CONT } \textit{npro}\text{[INDEX [1]]]\}} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} > \end{bmatrix}$$

This ensures that the two daughters are interpreted as the two terms of an identity predication and that the second daughter has a coindexed non-pronominal NP in its BIND set. This in turn ensures that any gap is non-pronominal and hence does not trigger agreement.

3. Abnormal sentences

Since agreement in Middle Welsh normally only occurs with pronouns, some special constraint must be responsible for agreement between a verb and a preceding subject which is a topic. There seem to be two possible approaches. Either the verb agrees directly with the subject or it agrees with a subject gap and that agrees with the visible subject. Meelen (2016: 6.4) takes the former approach. A problem here is that a topic can have various roles: subject, object or adjunct. In other words, topics appear to be filler-like elements associated with various positions in the following clause. It is not obvious how a verb could be made to agree with a preceding topic just in case it is understood as its subject. This suggests that the verb agrees with a subject gap.

One way to ensure this is to require the SLASH value in a nominal-topic clause to be pronominal. This will mean that the gap in such a clause is pronominal, and if it is in subject position, it will trigger agreement like any other pronominal subject. We can do this by assuming that these clauses are not head-filler-phrases but the realization of another subtype of *binary-slashed-head-phrase*, which we can call *nominal-topic-clause*. For head-filler phrases, we can propose the following constraint:

(12) *hd-fill-ph* $\Rightarrow$ [DTRS $<$ [SS[LOC[1]]], [SS[BIND {[1]}]] $>$]

This requires the LOCAL value of the first daughter to be identical the single member of the BIND set of the second daughter. For nominal-topic clauses, we can propose the constraint in (13):

(13) *nominal-topic-clause* $\Rightarrow$ $\begin{bmatrix} \text{DTRS} < \begin{bmatrix} \text{SS[LOC NP[TOPIC+, INDEX [1]]],} \\ \text{[SS[BIND \{[CONT } ppro\text{[INDEX [1]]}\}]] } > \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix}$

This says that the first daughter of a nominal-topic clause is a nominal topic and that the single member of the BIND set of the second daughter is a coindexed pronominal. If the first daughter is pronominal, they will be identical in every respect, but if it is non-pronominal, they will differ in one respect. In either case, a gap will be pronominal, and if it is in subject position, there will be agreement. I assume non-nominal-topic clauses such as (3) are a type of head–filler-phrase.

4. The nature of verb-second

One might suppose that the Middle Welsh verb-second requirement is a requirement that certain clauses contain a filler, but we have seen that the initial constituent in a mixed sentence is not a filler, and nor is a nominal topic in an abnormal sentence. Thus, this idea is untenable. However, both mixed and abnormal sentences involve an unbounded dependency, and on fairly standard HPSG assumptions, this means that the highest verb has a non-empty SLASH value. Hence, one might propose that the verb in a positive declarative main clause must have a non-empty SLASH value. Abnormal sentences and mixed/cleft sentences will conform to this constraint, but verb-initial positive declarative main clauses will not.

Two sorts of example pose problems for this approach. Firstly, there are examples with an initial non-finite verb separated from its complement, such as the following:

(14) Gwyssyaw   a   oruc   Arthur   milwyr   yr   ynys   honn ...
     summon.INF   PRT   did   Arthur   soldiers   the   island   this
     'Arthur summoned the soldiers of this island...'

As with similar examples in Modern Breton (Borsley & Kathol 2000), there is no reason to think that these involve an unbounded dependency. Rather, it is plausible to analyse the initial non-finite verb as

a lexical argument in an argument composition structure. If this is right, the finite verb will not have a non-empty SLASH value.

Secondly, there are examples with an expletive pronoun in initial position, such as (15):

(15) Ef   a   daw   glaw   gwaet …
     it   PRT   will.come   rain   blood
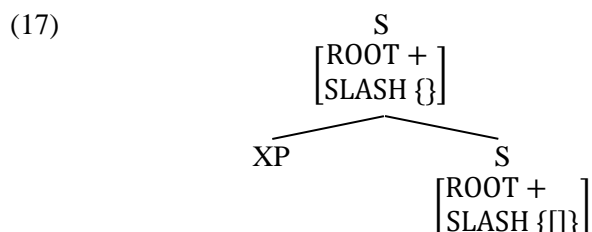   'There will come a rain of blood …'

Again, there is no reason to think that there is an unbounded dependency here, and so no reason to think that the finite verb has a non-empty SLASH value. This suggests that a different approach is required.

There are two obvious informal ways to describe the Middle Welsh verb-second restriction. One might say that a finite verb cannot appear in initial position in a positive declarative main clause. Alternatively, one might say that the finite verb must be in second position in a positive declarative main clause. A crucial fact about the second description is that it is not easy to formalise. It would be easy enough if the expression that precedes the finite verb was always a sister, but while this may be the case in examples like (14) above, with an initial non-finite verb, it is clearly not the case in abnormal sentences and mixed/cleft sentences as analysed above, and it is presumably not the case either in examples like (15) with an initial expletive. This suggests that the first description is the one to incorporate into an analysis.

If we assume that main clauses are [ROOT +] and positive clauses [POL(ARITY) *pos(itive)*], we might propose the following constraint for Middle Welsh:

$$(16) \quad \begin{bmatrix} declarative-clause \\ \text{SS|LOC|CAT} \begin{bmatrix} \text{HEAD} \begin{bmatrix} verb \\ \text{VFORM } fin \\ \text{ROOT } + \\ \text{POL } pos \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{DTRS} < [1], ... > \end{bmatrix} \Rightarrow [1] \neq [\text{SS|LOC|CAT|HEAD } [\text{VFORM } fin]]$$

This says that the first daughter of a finite positive declarative main clause may not be a finite element. But there is a problem here. As analysed above, abnormal sentences and mixed/cleft sentences will involve a structure of the following form:

(17)
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                    S
              ┌ ROOT +   ┐
              └ SLASH {} ┘
           ┌────────┴────────┐
          XP                  S
                        ┌ ROOT +     ┐
                        └ SLASH {[]} ┘
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In both types of clause, the second daughter is a head and hence, on standard assumptions, is [ROOT+] like the mother. But clearly the second daughter can and normally will have a finite verb as its first daughter

One response to this problem would be to stipulate that the head in such clauses is always [ROOT –]. But this is only possible in a version of HPSG assuming a default Head Feature Principle. An alternative is suggested by Bonami *et al.* (2016), who propose that Modern Welsh has not a two-way distinction between main and subordinate clauses, but a three-way distinction between simple main, simple complement, and unbounded dependency clauses, encoded as the value of a feature STATUS. For Middle Welsh we can propose that the third type is not unbounded dependency clauses, but extended clauses in which a basic clause combines with a preceding sister of some kind. This will include both unbounded dependency clauses and clauses like (15). Assuming that simple non-extended main clauses are [STATUS *main*], we can reformulate (16) as follows:

$$(18) \quad \begin{bmatrix} declarative-clause \\ \text{SS|LOC|CAT} \begin{bmatrix} \text{HEAD} \begin{bmatrix} verb \\ \text{VFORM } fin \\ \text{STATUS } main \\ \text{POL } pos \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{DTRS} < [1], ... > \end{bmatrix} \quad \Rightarrow \quad [1] \neq [\text{SS|LOC|CAT|HEAD [VFORM } fin]]$$

This says that the first daughter of a simple finite positive declarative main clause may not be a finite verb. It will rule out a finite verb in initial position in simple finite positive declarative main clauses, but have no effect on the second daughter in (17), which will be [STATUS *extended*].

This approach might seem to have a problem with certain acceptable verb-initial clauses, e.g. the second conjunct in (19):

(19) … ac yna y kyuodes sabot ac a elwis ___ ar bown
        and there PRT arose Sabot and PRT called on Bown
    'And then Sabot arose and called on Bown …'

However, Willis (1998) argues that such clauses involve an unexpressed topic and an unbounded dependency of some kind. One might assume that they have a phonologically empty topic. But following Müller's (2014: 101) analysis of similar German 'topic-drop' sentences, one can analyse them as involving a unary branching structure in which an S[SLASH { }] has a single daughter, which is an S[SLASH {NP}]. As long as this structure is [STATUS *extended*], it will be unaffected by the constraint in (18).

This structure can be assigned to a type *unexpressed-topic-clause*. Apart from having just a single daughter (which is a head), this will be similar to the type *binary-slashed-head-phrase* introduced above. The similarities can be captured by treating them as two subtypes of a type *slashed-head-phrase*. The main properties identified in (10) above can be assigned to this type, and both *binary-slashed-head-phrase* and *unexpressed-topic-clause* will be subject to very simple constraints. The former just needs to ensure that there are two daughters, while the latter just needs to ensure that there is just one daughter and that an unexpressed topic is part of its interpretation.

Thus, with appropriate types and constraints, it is not too difficult to account for the complexities of Middle Welsh verb-second.

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