Prepositional aspect constructions in Hiberno-English

Lukas Pietsch
University of Hamburg, Research Center on Multilingualism

Tense-aspect periphrases of the structural type be + preposition + gerund have been a shared feature of Irish and English for several centuries. Its best-known instantiation is the so-called after perfect. However, it can best be accounted for in the context of the other, similar constructions, although some of these come from a historically different origin. Based on a scenario involving reinforcement of already present constructional possibilities in English through contact with Irish, it is suggested that the syntactic productivity of the prepositional construction schema in Irish was among the crucial cognitive factors that conditioned both the replication of the after construction and the strengthening and preservation of its siblings with for and about in Irish English.

Keywords: English, Hiberno-English, Irish, tense and aspect, grammaticalisation, syntactic productivity, Construction Grammar, contact linguistics, syntactic replication

1. Introduction

This paper1 deals with the history of a class of verbal periphrases of the type in (1), henceforth called "prepositional tense/aspect constructions", or "prepositional constructions" for short, in Irish English (Hiberno-English) and in Irish.

1. This paper is based on research carried out in the Collaborative Research Center 538 "Multilingualism" hosted at the University of Hamburg and funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). My thanks are due to all my colleagues at the research center who have given valuable input to this research in the form of discussion and collaboration, as well as to the participants of the Workshop on "Multilingualism and Universal Principles of Linguistic Change" held at the Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea in Bremen, August 2006. I also thank David Denison, Teresa Fanego and Merja Kyöö for sharing their opinions and for

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The best-known instance of this pattern is the so-called "after perfect" in Hiberno-English (2a) and its equivalent in Irish (2b).

(2) a. I am after going
   b. Tá mé tar éis imeachta
   is me after going

This, however, is only one member of a whole family of equally interesting – if less prominent – patterns, which has been quite productive in Irish and to a somewhat lesser extent in Hiberno-English. In Irish, at least the following prepositions have been attested in this role: ag `at`, i `in`, do `to`, ar `on`, iar `after`, tar éis `after`, i ndáidh `after`, chun `towards`, le `with`, ar tí `on the point of`. In English, the relevant items include on, for, about, after, and upon. In both languages, these constructions cover the aspecto-temporal semantic areas of simultaneity (durative/progressive), retroactivity (perfect) and prospectivity.

This article will put forward the hypothesis that the parallel development of the English constructions following the Irish ones is at least partly due to language contact, even though the scenario is not a straightforward one. In the previous literature, only the after perfect has generally been recognised as a clear instance of structural transfer. The other, minor instantiations of the pattern are partly not yet very well documented historically, and – what is even more problematic from a contact-linguistic point of view – some of them have not been restricted to Ireland but are also attested in other, unrelated varieties. The pattern be + preposition + VP was an option whose structural foundations were already present in English, in the form of one or two minor, peripheral instantiations, when English-Irish contact was in its crucial stage. However, under contact with Irish, and enriched with new lexical instantiations such as the after perfect, it was apparently reinforced and gained significantly in productivity and frequency in Hiberno-English as compared with other varieties.

Besides the purely historical interest inherent in this scenario, there is also a theoretical concern to this discussion. The contact scenario crucially involves cognitive acts of “interlingual identification” (Weinreich 1953) between abstract structural patterns in the two languages that are functionally and formally similar but not identical. This implies an approach to grammatical theory that takes the “construction” to be a central unit in the organisation of linguistic knowledge. In particular, I will argue that an approach based on Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2006) lends itself best to the description of this process, where interlingual identification seems to have operated simultaneously on the level of the more abstract constructional schema of ‘be’ + preposition + VP and on the level of its specific, lexically filled instantiations with their individual semantic and pragmatic properties, such as the after perfect.

The paper is organised as follows: In Sections 2–3, I will provide an historical survey of the constructions in question. I will first give a brief outline of the situation in Irish (Section 2), based on the existing descriptive literature. This will serve as the typological backdrop to the developments in Hiberno-English. The situation in English will be the subject of Section 3. This section will present original corpus data from Hiberno-English material of the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as some comparative data from British varieties. Section 4 will then provide discussion and comparison of the data and relate them to the theoretical issue of a cognitively plausible modelling of contact-induced change.

2. Irish

In Irish, prepositional tense/aspect constructions – known in the grammatical literature under terms such as “aimsirí timchainteachta” (“periphrastic tenses”, Bráithre Cristóirí 1960:173), “periphrastic aspectual phrases” (Ó Siadhail 1989:294–302), or “conjuguaison périphrastique” (Gagnepain 1963:240) – have been a feature of the language for a long time, although most of them have not been fully grammaticalised to the same extent as in some other modern Celtic languages (Ó Corráin 1997). Table 1 lists the patterns that are or have been attested, for a brief overview. These constructions can be seen as a family linked together by a common semantic schema instantiated by each, and by a common syntactic shape – even though, it should be noted, the syntactic structure of the embedded verbal noun clause differs somewhat between constructions.\(^3\)

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3. Internal differences relate mostly to the coding of object NPs within the verbal noun clause. While in some types they are coded as genitives following the verbal noun, in others they are preposed to a position before the verbal noun, and separated from it by a particle a.
Table 1. Prepositional tense/aspect constructions in Irish.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction</th>
<th>Lexical source</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ag + VN</td>
<td>‘at’</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i' + poss. + VN</td>
<td>‘in’</td>
<td>Progressive (unaccusatives)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do' + poss. + VN</td>
<td>‘to’</td>
<td>Progressive (passive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a' + VN (&lt; do)</td>
<td>‘to’</td>
<td>Progressive (in wh-movement environments)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for/ar + VN</td>
<td>‘on’</td>
<td>Durative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iarN/arN + VN</td>
<td>‘after’</td>
<td>Perfect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tar éis + VN</td>
<td>‘after’</td>
<td>Perfect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i ndiaidh + VN</td>
<td>‘after’</td>
<td>Perfect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chun + VN</td>
<td>‘towards’</td>
<td>Prospective (intentional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>le + VN</td>
<td>‘for/with’</td>
<td>Prospective (obligative)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.1  

Ag ‘at’, do ‘to’, and i ‘in’

The preposition ag (Old Irish oc) has been attested in the pattern be at V-ing since the earliest medieval documents of Irish (Gagnepain 1963: 49). While in Old Irish it was still only in an early phase of its grammaticalisation and not yet consistently used to denote progressive aspect (Ronan 2003), its use has steadily expanded and gained in importance throughout the history of Irish (Gagnepain 1963: 141). In Scots Gaelic and Welsh, a similar progressive construction has all but ousted the simple tense forms in many environments (Ó Corráin 1997).

Within the progressive construction, ag alternates with some other prepositional items depending on the environment. In passive clauses, ag is replaced by do ‘to’. (As is generally the case in Irish, the passive itself is marked not by verb morphology, but by the presence of a resumptive possessive pronoun marking the patient of the verbal noun as coreferential with the subject).

(3) tá mé do mo bhualadh
is 1_i to myi_beating
'I am being beaten.'

Additionally, in some constellations where the order between the verbal noun and its objects differs from the canonical structure, especially when the object is moved out of the verbal noun clause by means of wh-movement, the preposition is further weakened and replaced by a', also historically a reflex of do. Yet another alternation occurs with a certain closed class of intransitive (unaccusative) verbs, most of them expressing physical position or state. Here, ag is replaced by i' ‘in’.

(The construction then also displays a special syntax similar to that of the passives mentioned above, with a resumptive possessive pronoun between the preposition and the verbal noun.)

(4) tá sé ina shuí
is he in_his_sitting
'he is sitting.'

2.2 iar and ar ‘on/after’

The historical situation with this group of prepositions is complex, owing mostly to the conflation of several source prepositions during Middle and Early Modern Irish (Gagnepain 1963: 174, 261, 287; Greene 1979; Ó Sé 2004: 191f.). In 17th-century Irish, there was one preposition ar ‘on’, itself a product of an earlier merger of two items ar and for; and another preposition iarN ‘after’. Both items came to be distinguished only by the pattern of initial mutation triggered on the following word, and their functions tended to be conflated, to the point where arN ‘after’ was eventually replaced by other items (iar éis, i ndiaidh).

For/ar ‘on’ had been an alternative to ag as an item expressing duration of a state or action in certain environments. Its use in such a durative function can be traced back to roughly the 14th or 15th century. In the 17th century, it occurred in passive progressives (5) and in progressives of some intransitive verbs (6).

(5) do chleachtadh Ceat inchinn Mheis-Geaghra
was accustomed Ceat brain M.G.
do bhí do bhí ar imchar aige
being on carrying at_him
'Ceat used to carry Meis Geaghra’s brain with him.' [Gagnepain 1963: 289]

(6) an roth geintlidhe do bhí ar siubhal ar dhorus an dínaimh
the wheel magic rel was on turning on gate the fort.gen
'the magic wheel that was turning at the gate of the fort'
[Gagnepain 1963: 289]

The near-homophonic (i)arN ‘after’ was the original item used to form the ‘after’ perfect. Isolated instances of it in this function have been attested since the 12th century, but it did not become common in the written language until the 16th or 17th century (Ó Sé 2004: 187–189). Unlike in present-day Irish, where its prototypical use is to denote recent past (as is also characteristic of the Hiberno-English after perfect), at earlier stages it could also express more generally perfect and relative-past meanings, as in (7). It was then ousted from this wider use by the rise of a rival construction, the participial perfect of the type tá sé dēunta again ‘I have it done’ (Ó Corráin 2006: 167).
The durative construction with *ar* ‘on’ and the perfect construction with *(i)arN* ‘after’ were formally indistinguishable in some environments and were sometimes conflated. Thus (8) shows an instance where the preposition can morphologically be identified as *(i)arN* ‘after’ but behaves semantically more like the earlier durative *ar* ‘on’, while (9) shows a sentence containing two instances that are formally identical, but of which the first can be glossed as present/durative and the second as perfect.

(7) *Dia fíre dí Dhiubh, atá iarn-a gheineamhoin*

God true from God true, reli.is after his begetting

(gan) déanomh

NEG making

‘true God of true God, who was begotten, not created’

[1616: Uí Bheirn 2004]

From the 17th century onwards, *(i)ar* ‘after’ became obsolete in Irish in most environments and was lexically replaced by other items, composite prepositional expressions such as *tar éis* (contracted *tréis*) and *i ndíaidh*. These also took over its role in the perfect periphrasis.

(8) *blaídh an rghrá an rna dhorchúghadh*

is.fut the sun after its darkening

‘the sun will be darkened.’ (Lat. ‘sol obscurebitur’) [Ó Corráin 2006: 157]

(9) *gé atá mo chorp ar marthain / tám ar scarthain*

although is my body on living / is.1sg after parting

rem anam

from my soul

‘although my body lives, I have parted from my soul.’ [Ó Sé 2004: 191]

2.3 *Le* ‘with’, *chun* ‘towards’

Besides the progressive and perfect constructions discussed so far, Irish has for a long time had a number of future-oriented, prospective periphrases. They use the prepositions *le*, *chun*, as well as several composite prepositional items.

*Chun* ‘towards’ (from earlier *dchothum*) has been attested in this function since the 15th century in written Irish, but has reportedly become restricted to Munster dialects (O’Rahilly 1932: 233). The form *le* is today identified with the lexeme *le* ‘with’. However, historically it is a reflex of yet another case of a merger with a different preposition, *fri > ré > lé*, which has gone through a semantic development from orientation in space (‘facing towards’) through adversative (‘against’), comitative (‘with’) to instrument (‘with’) meanings, as well as meanings of goal (‘to’)

2nd proofs
collection of published trial records spanning the time between 1670 and 1834; the Corpus of Late 18th Century Prose (Van Bergen/Denison 2003; henceforth CL18CP), which consists of letters written by and to the manager of a large rural estate in north-west England during the late 18th century; a corpus of New York newspaper advertisements, also from the late 18th century (Triggs 1996); and finally some data from the Corpus of 19th Century English (CONCE) (Kytö/Rudanko 2000).

What we find in English is, again, a whole group of seemingly similar constructions (see Table 2 for an overview). They came from different sources, some of them within Standard English and some directly replicated from Irish. Because of the heterogeneity of the sources, the contact effect did not result in an exact one-to-one correspondence across all items involved across the two languages. However, the net effect was nevertheless one of structural convergence:

as the outcome, we find a family of constructions in Hiberno-English that bears unmistakable points of correspondence to the Irish one.

### 3.1 Non-perfect after and related uses

Before dealing with the well-known after perfect itself, we need to discuss a group of curious use types found in earlier (17th and 18th century) literary representations of Hiberno-English, which have given rise to a good deal of discussion and some puzzlement in the literature (Bliss 1979: 302f.; Filppula 1999: 99–107; McCafferty 2003, 2004; Ó Sé 2004; Ó Corráin 2006). Here, after, as well as other prepositions (at least according to some isolated attestations) are employed in a function that is not easily definable but clearly distinct from the perfect function familiar from later stages of the dialect. The preposition is typically combined with other markers of non-present time, most frequently a future-oriented modal such as _will_ or _would_ (13). The resulting construction generally appears to have the temporal meaning expressed in Standard English by the same combination just without the prepositional element, rendering the preposition itself seemingly otiose. This use type has been dubbed the “futuric” after (McCafferty 2003), although it is far from obvious in what sense the preposition as such really contributes to the overall construction.

(13) I expect your honour _will be after doing_ the same this year

(_= …will be doing…??) [1800, quoted in McCafferty 2004: 140]

According to one opinion proposed by several older authors and most recently upheld to some extent by Ó Sé (2004: 243), non-perfect after should be seen with scepticism and should most probably be discarded as an inauthentic artefact of “stage Irish”, produced by English authors not natively familiar with the dialect. However, McCafferty (2004) and Ó Corráin (2006) argue convincingly for its authenticity, which leaves us with the question of how to analyse it semantically. Pace Hickey (2000: 100) it seems fairly clear that the construction is semantically distinct from the perfect _after_ and that the semantic contribution made by the preposition is not one of perfect (relative past); thus the combinations with _will_ cannot simply be analysed as future perfects (McCafferty 2004: 102). However, McCafferty’s alternative proposal, of analysing _after_ as a separate futuric construction, meets with some empirical difficulties too. McCafferty (2004) develops an ingenious scenario according to which _after_ underwent two parallel and partly simultaneous grammaticalisation processes, one leading to a perfect and the other to a prospective/future. This duality would be motivated by the “Ianus-like”

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5. The Corpus of Late 18th Century Prose, compiled by Linda van Bergen and David Denison, was created in the course of the research project “The English language of the north-west in the late Modern English period” at the University of Manchester, on the basis of material held in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester.

6. The Corpus of Nineteenth-Century English (CONCE) was compiled under the supervision of Merja Kytö and Juhan Rudanko at Uppsala University and University of Tampere in May 2000. My thanks go to Merja Kytö and Juhani Rudanko at Uppsala University and University of Tampere in May 2000.

7. Of the constructions listed here, the Middle English progressive with _on_ needs not to be considered further, as it had long become obsolete by the time of the the Irish-English contact. Hypotheses about the role of a different (British) Celtic contact effect involved in its development cannot be treated in this paper (cf. Keller 1925; Wagner 1959; Elsness 1994; Vezzosi 1996; Poppe/Mittendorf 2000; Poppe 2002, 2003; Filppula 2003).
properties of the source semantics of locative after, in connection with different ways how time relations are conceptually mapped into the metaphorical domain of space. However, there is little or no evidence that after, on its own, could constitute future or prospective meaning. All the examples McCafferty quotes seem to owe their future semantics first and foremost to the presence of will or other elements of the grammatical context.

We are thus left with the hypothesis proposed by Bliss (1979:302) as the most likely explanation for this curious construction. Bliss proposes that it is a borrowing from a different source preposition, the preposition ar 'on'. As discussed earlier in Section 2.2, the prepositions iarN after and ar on had become confusable in Irish for phonological reasons and were in a state of variability. Ó Corráin (2006), building further on Bliss' hypothesis, demonstrates that iarN had intruded into non-past environments and was being used in ways quite similar to the non-perfect after attestations in English. Ó Corráin points especially to the correspondence between examples such as (14a, b) and (15a, b).8

(14) a. You will be after being damned
b. beidh tú ar do fhliuchadh be.fut you after your making.most
‘you will be made most.’

(15) a. I will be after being absolv'd
b. biaidh mé air mo ghlanadh be.fut I after my cleansing
‘I will be cleansed.’

Both the seemingly non-perfect Irish iar constructions and the English non-perfect after constructions are very frequently used in passive forms, just like the original Irish ar on' construction was. Moreover, many of the uses of English after appear to be consistent with a reading of durability, also corresponding to the original meaning of ar on.9

8. An anonymous reviewer questions the formal parallel observed here (which Ó Corráin calls “patently obvious”), on the grounds of the different morphosyntactic material employed by the Irish and English constructions (in particular, being + passive participle on the English and possessive + verbal noun on the Irish side). The parallel, however, lies in the fact that the possessive construction – as in mo ghlanadh ‘my cleansing’ – represents the standard way Irish marks passives in peripherals of this type; thus both the English and the Irish construction ultimately consist of an element denoting futurity, an element denoting the passive, and the preposition ar after.

9. McCafferty, too, notes (2004:138) that some examples he cannot easily classify as future have ‘connotations of past habituality with no sense of prediction’ or “iterative meanings”.

Somewhat more dubious as to their authenticity are a few attestations found in one early text edited and discussed in Bliss (1979:124f., 303), a short satirical piece of mock Irish English of 1684 called Bog Witticisms, where a similar usage is found not with after, but other prepositions: three times with for (16) and once with upon (17).

(16) a. Y will be for making Child upon dy Body
b. Vee will shut up Housh-kepin and be for livein aul togadder
c. Dou shaut be for sending Aunswer to vaat Y havent sent de

(17) aund Y cannot be upon vaaking but the Deevil take me, Y do fall upon dream ing consharning thy shweet shelfe [Bliss 1979:124]

Bliss notes that the source is “not a text which inspires much confidence” and that the structure may well be “the result of some error or misunderstanding.”10 However, whether or not the precise usage of the two prepositions is being rendered correctly, the passage may still be of interest, at least as indirect evidence of the stereotyped outside perception of the dialect. The occurrence of as many as four tokens of this kind in a short passage of a few lines indicates that the author intended them as part of the linguistic satire, i.e. as a reference to a marked and socially stigmatised Hibernism. As such, even if the author got the precise lexical usage wrong, these examples may well attest to the existence of the overall pattern of prepositional circumlocations.

It is not unlikely that here, too, the Irish iar/ar confusability may ultimately provide the explanation. As the English equivalents of after and on were functionally merging in these kinds of constructions, after could easily be replaced with upon in the emerging English structure. Bliss specifically explains upon waking as a direct calque of Irish ar múscailt (’awake’, lit. ’after waking up’); in this idiom, ar etymologically represents (i)arN ‘after’, but is formally indistinguishable from ar ‘on’ in this phonological environment.

3.2 The after perfect

The function and history of the after perfect proper in Hiberno-English needs not to be discussed in great detail here, as it is sufficiently known in the literature (Filppula 1999; Hickey 2000; McCafferty 2006). In short, be after V-ing is one of the characteristic Irish perfect constructions, sometimes dubbed a “hot-news” perfect (Harris 1984) or “immediate perfect”. There is general agreement in the

10. A similar reservation is emphasised by an anonymous reviewer, who suggests that an isolated token like (17) “may be more an example of Saussure’s parole than of langue.”
literature that it derives from Irish. In present-day Hiberno-English, it contrasts with a second type of perfect, the transitive so-called "medial-object perfects" (I have my dinner eaten), whose development has also often been discussed in relationship with a similar construction in Irish, the passival participial perfects (Filppula 1999; O Sé 2004; Pietsch 2005). The semantic distinction is mainly that the after perfect denotes an event in the immediately recent past relative to a reference time, whereas the medial-object perfect has resultative and statal uses.

Compared with the non-perfect after constructions of the 17th and 18th centuries discussed in the previous section, the perfect after construction is relatively young. McCafferty (2004: 139) demonstrates how the younger, perfect use of after ousted the older non-perfect ("futuric") use in the course of a century of variable usage, between roughly 1750 and 1850 (cf. also Filppula 1999:104). McCafferty finds the earliest true, prototypical modern perfect token recorded in 1767 (18):

(18) Why, friend, my master is Mr. Delamour, who is just after coming from Paris, ..., [1767, quoted in McCafferty 2004: 139]

In modern dialect data, Filppula (1999:101) notes an apparently higher frequency of the after perfect in Dublin speech as opposed to other dialects, and an "almost total absence" from the south-west; a fact possibly linked to the dialectal variation within Irish, where the south-western dialects of Munster and Connacht display less usage of the Irish after perfect and a relative preference for the passival participial perfect instead; see O Sé (2004).

Comparable data from the Hamburg Corpus of Irish English is not particularly conclusive, owing to small token counts. The corpus contains only seven attestations, all of them consistent with the expected recent-past冈tenations. The earlier non-perfect use of after is not attested. With the earliest perfect token recorded in 1851, the data would seem to corroborate the findings regarding a relatively late spread of the construction. It does not, however, confirm Filppula's geographical findings, as five out of the seven tokens are indeed from Munster writers, from the dialect area that according to Filppula least favoured the construction.

11. Pace Kelly (1989), who is quoted in the literature as having advocated an origin of the construction in English dialects from outside Ireland, based on scattered evidence of some similar usages in late-19th century and 20th century dialects. Unfortunately I was unable to access this paper (which is discussed briefly in McCafferty 2004:124). I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to it.

3.3 For

Just as in Irish, the semantic domain of prospective (future-oriented) constructions has given rise to several prepositional constructions in English. The first to be discussed here is one using for, followed by a discussion of about. Both of these constructions differ from the after perfect in that Hiberno-English has shared them with emergent Standard English at some stage.

Be for V-ing was used in 17th and 18th century Standard English as a verbal prospective periphrasis, with a meaning of 'plan to V', 'intend to V'. While it soon became obsolete again in Standard English, it was preserved in very much the same function as a dialectal archaism in Irish English. This usage appears to be distinct from the doubtful nonce attestation of will be for V-ing in the 17th century text discussed earlier in Section 3.1. Although the construction is solidly attested in some corpora, it has not made it into the Oxford English Dictionary (henceforth OED) or into compendia such as Visser (1963), where only a semi-

A useful overview of the diachrony of the usage of for in British (London-based) English can be gleaned from the Old Bailey Proceedings. The construction is already in existence, though rare, in the earliest parts of the corpus, between 1670 and 1700. It becomes fairly frequent during the first half of the 18th century, reaching a peak around 1750, when it occurs in the records with a frequency well above the comparable constructions be about to V or be about V-ing (about which see next section). After 1770, it takes a very sudden decline, and by 1800 it has become decidedly marginal. The last, isolated, tokens recorded in this corpus are from 1820 and 1826. Table 3 shows the token and frequency figures across seven sub-periods.

The for construction is still relatively frequent in the CL18CP, of the late 18th century. With 13 instances in a corpus of just over 270,000 words, its raw textual frequency is somewhat higher than in the Proceedings (though such a direct comparison is of limited value, as raw text frequencies are obviously dependent on conditions of subject matter, genre and register); and it is also again a good deal more frequent than either the gerundial or the infinitival about construction within the same texts.
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Table 3. Occurrences of be for V-ing in the Old Bailey Proceedings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Tokens</th>
<th>Tokens per million words</th>
<th>Word count (approx.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1670–1699</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>1,423,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1700–1729</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13.09</td>
<td>2,292,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1730–1759</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>13.77</td>
<td>7,915,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760–1779</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>7,049,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780–1799</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>14,411,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800–1819</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>13,462,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820–1834</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>16,455,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>63,007,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The picture is different in other corpora, however. The New York newspaper advertisements corpus, roughly contemporary with the CL18CP, contains not a single example. The CONCE, finally, has only two apparent examples, both from private letters from the first decades of the 19th century.12

(20) a. My brother Tom looked very unwell yesterday, and I am for shipping him off to Lisbon.

b. William is for trying for a Cure.

We may conclude that by the end of the 18th century, the be for V-ing construction had been effectively ousted from educated written British English. As the material from the CL18CP comes from a time when according to the Proceedings the structure seems to have already been on its decline in London speech, its continued presence in this material and its absence elsewhere probably point to a longer survival in more peripheral regional varieties.

The letters from the Hamburg Corpus of Irish English attest to the same kind of usage of for, and crucially, for its preservation all through the 19th century. Again, we must be content with much smaller token counts, due to the smaller corpus size and the overall rareness of the construction. The Hamburg corpus contains five tokens, produced by four different writers – considerably fewer than the earlier British CL18CP, but more than the contemporary CONCE in terms of text frequency (considering that the letters-only part of the CONCE and the two other corpora are of roughly equal word count.)

(21) a. A last request I ask is to write by this ship what you are for doing [McLee01, 1828]

b. They are for writing soon [Hammon03, 1845]

c. As he tells me that he is for writing by this mail [McCanc03, 1859]

d. But as he told me that he was for writing to you by this mail [McCanc04, 1860]

e. I would like to let my mate know what I am for doing [Millik01, 1884]

By the late 19th century, the construction was apparently felt to be a characteristic marker of Irish dialectal speech. In a work on Irish folklore from the early 20th century (O’Neill 1913), it is found in a passage of a folk story purportedly “translated from the Irish” (22). The nonstandard construction is evidently used here to give the language an Irish stylistic flair:

(22) “Upon my word, you’re a fine music master,” says the piper then; “but tell me where you’re for bringing me.” – “There’s a great feast in the house of the Banshee, on the top of Croagh Patric, tonight,” Says the Puca, “and I’m for bringing you there to play music and, take my word, you’ll get the price for your trouble.”13

Montgomery (2006:20) confirms the survival of the for construction in Ulster English (Ulster Scots) until the present, with attestations taken from Fenton (2000) and several literary representations of modern Ulster Scots.

(23) a. I thought you were never for coming


It is also possible to find occasional attestations of the construction in colloquial present-day Irish English, as in the following two entries from internet chatrooms and guestbooks, both written by teenagers from Northern Ireland (24a, b).

(24) a. What are you for doing this weekend? Wana have another girly nite?14

b. its no problem..... what are you for doing this weekend?15

12. In identifying instances of the be for V-ing construction in written corpora, there is an empirical difficulty in telling them apart from the formally identical but pragmatically different modern be for X construction (meaning ‘be in favour of X’). The operative difference is that the latter construction pragmatically presupposes the existence of contrastive choice, dealing with something you are for as opposed to a presupposed alternative you are against. In addition, the be for X construction does not entail that the subject of the clause intends to carry out the action himself. The two instances quoted from CONCE seem to be pragmatically consistent with the verbal periphrasis.


There is little evidence regarding a possible continuity between this for construction and the nonce attestation of the will be for V-ing use in the 1684 Hiberno-English Bog Witticisms, where for is semantically either durative or otiose. While both are attested at roughly the same time, nothing can be said about possible influences either way. However, the very fact that the anonymous author chose to use the will be for V-ing form with an apparent intent of effecting a caricature of a non-standard variety, at a time when a formally similar be for V-ing construction already existed in more mainstream varieties of the language, would seem to indicate that he perceived it as distinct and unrelated.

3.4 About

Prospective constructions with about + VP have been common in English for a long time. The OED describes be about to V, in essentially its modern meaning, as attested from the mid-16th century. It differs from the for construction semantically in denoting temporal imminence rather than planned intention.

Its grammaticalisation history, as mirrored in earlier use types reported in the OED, indicates that its origin lies not so much in the preposition about, but rather the adverb about, used here originally in the sense of 'afoot,' 'astir' (25).

(25) Bisi aboute þei han been To cacchen hit with al heore miht.
‘they have been busy about to catch it with all their might.’ [1360; OED v. “about”]

The verbal complement used in the about construction was originally a to-infinitive, sometimes also a for to phrase. The use of an -ing form in its stead is a later innovation, datable only to the 18th century (26). It can be interpreted as part of a long-term trend in English for an expansion of the -ing form at the expense of the infinitive (cf. Fanego 2004), and, in light of the discussion of the previous section, it may have partly been due to the parallel with the somewhat earlier for construction (whose origin is unambiguously prepositional).

(26) He might give a satisfactory answer respecting the Person to whom he is about setting the Corn Mill [CL18CP, 1782, John Philips]

Again, a good diachronic summary can be gleaned from the Old Bailey Proceedings. Summary statistics are provided in Table 4. During the first decades of the period covered (1670–1700), and indeed still in the first decade of the 18th century, we find the older, infinitival pattern exclusively. The first two recorded instances of the -ing form occur, isolated as yet, in 1716 and 1726 respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Gerunds tokens</th>
<th>Gerund per million words</th>
<th>Infinitives tokens</th>
<th>Infinitive per million words</th>
<th>Word count (approx.)</th>
<th>% Gerunds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1670–1699</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>1,423,000</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1700–1729</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2,292,000</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1730–1759</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>7,915,000</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760–1779</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>7,049,000</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780–1799</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>14,411,000</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800–1819</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>13,462,000</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820–1834</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>16,455,000</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The gerund pattern then advances rapidly until it reaches a peak during the third quarter of the 18th century, when its frequency is almost on a par with that of the infinitive. After that, however, it very soon begins to decline again, and ends up at a frequency level of between 20% and 30% at the beginning of the 19th century, with a steady downward trend in terms of relative frequency as compared to the competing infinitive construction (even though in terms of absolute token counts the last two decades again seem to show an increase). In comparison, the about construction developed somewhat later than the for construction, and then went out of use later and somewhat less abruptly.

The data from two other late-18th century corpora at our disposal, the CL18CP and the New York newspaper corpus, fit in well with this picture. Each corpus (being much smaller in size than the Old Bailey collection) only has a handful of attestations, four in each case. Half of them have the gerundial form, which is just about the proportion to be expected on the basis of the Old Bailey data for that time period.

The picture changes radically in the CONCE, which covers language from a later period and, crucially, also from a range of registers closer to the literary standard. Here, the infinitival pattern is overwhelmingly in the majority. Besides 65 tokens of be about to V, found across all parts of the corpus, there is only a single instance of be about V-ing, dating from the 1850s. Characteristically, this instance occurs again in a trial transcript, i.e. in a portion of the corpus that represents the same kind of approximation of the spoken colloquial language as the Old Bailey collection. The witness whose speech is being recorded is a servant, presumably from the lower social ranks. Interestingly, the witness's use of the gerund echoes an immediately preceding phrase by the interrogator – but he has used the infinitive, apparently felt to be the more standard form by that time.
(27) - Was it when you first went into the service, or when you were about to leave it?
   - I was just about leaving.

It appears, in short, that be about V-ing lived on into the mid-19th century in some varieties of the spoken language in British English, but that it was marginalised and excluded from educated standard English soon after 1800.

We can now again proceed to the Irish English data from the Hamburg corpus, for comparison. Despite a lack of conclusiveness due to overall smallish token counts, this corpus again gives some indication that the situation in Irish English differed from Standard English: the gerundial forms are more frequent, and seem to survive longer. There are 8 tokens of the gerund as opposed to only 3 of the infinitive. The gerund forms occur in writers from all geographical areas, including some of relatively high education, and crucially, they persist even into the latest stages covered by the corpus, right into the early 20th century.

(28) a. a parcel of land on the Bury Estate which was then about being sold [ForreE01, 1906]
b. Some of the estates you are about purchasing [RyanJ_01, 1908]

These latter two examples are both written by Catholic smallholding farmers from the province of Munster. Both writers show strong indications of typical Hiberno-English dialect features otherwise, such as transitive perfects with medial object positions (of the type “I have the work done”) or the use of the present tense instead of the perfect in sentences with for or since. Tentatively, we can take these late attestations as an indication that the about V-ing construction survived as a dialectal archaism in Irish English, probably longer than it did in Britain and elsewhere, although, unlike in the case of for, I currently have no data about its possible survival into the present.

3.5 On

Finally, the Hamburg Corpus also contains a hapax legomenon attestation of what may have been yet another instance of the same constructional pattern: be on V-ing. Despite its very scarce attestation, it is interesting enough to warrant a discussion in terms of a potential further member of the group under study here. The single attested example dates from 1875 (29).

(29) Your aunt Angess McKeer is on dying. We dont expect she will live long. [1875, Brenna06] 16

Like the constructions with for and about, (29) seems to have a prospective, future-oriented meaning. This is important because as an adverbial subordinator, temporal on otherwise denotes immediate relative past (completion) rather than futurity. On this basis, one might expect be on V-ing to act more like a perfect construction, just like in the case of after. However, the intended futuric meaning of (29) is clear from the context. It apparently carries an implication not of intentionality, but rather of an impending, causally unavoidable event. The Standard English item most akin to this in form and structure would be be close on V-ing. Similar to the case of for and after, there seems to be little or no semantic continuity between this use and the early use of upon in the 1684 text discussed earlier. No hints as to the existence of a be on V-ing construction were found for other varieties of English. If these isolated tokens represent actual use types and not mere one-off idiosyncrasies, we would be dealing with a situation similar to that of after and possibly for: an older, 17th-century type of the pattern modal + be + preposition + V-ing, with a semantic value that is somewhat indistinct but probably related to the Irish ar iar merger; and a more recent use type lacking the collocation with the modal verb, and having a clear semantic value of temporal sequence on its own.

4 Comparison and discussion

We can now proceed to compare the English and the Irish data under historical and typological perspectives. In terms of historical sequence, it will be noted that the Irish construction pattern is generally older than the English one. Even though many of the Irish forms discussed above did not become common in writing until fairly late, the general pattern is attested from the earliest times in the case of ag, and at least from the Middle Ages onwards in the case of several of the others. In English, on the other hand, the preposition + V-ing patterns are attested only from the 17th century.

More interesting than the mere temporal comparison is a comparison of the functional paths of development that both languages underwent. In Irish, it will be noted that virtually all the prepositions in question are spatial in origin. The

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16. From Fitzpatrick (1994:409). The expression is actually spelled “undying” instead of “on dying” in the original. The emendation seems safe to make, since the negation marker un- was clearly not intended in the context.
items used for periphrases of temporal simultaneity (progressive and durative), i.e. *ag ’at, *fín ’in* and *ar ’on*, denote proximity in space. As such, they represent the universal grammaticalisation path that draws on the spatial metaphor where the boundaries of a temporal process are conceptualised as spatial entities. This path is known as a common source for progressive constructions cross-linguistically (Heine 1993). The source of *do *to* is similar, likewise related to local proximity, although it does not match the universal prototype for progressives quite as closely, since it denotes movement towards rather than location in a spatial entity.

In the case of the prospective constructions, the sources of *le i < O.Ir. frí ’to, against* and of *chuin ’towards* are also both solidly spatial, even though in the case of *le* this semantic source has been obliterated through later developments. Both represent the common grammaticalisation path from goal-directed motion via intentionality to futurity (Bybee/Pagliuca/Perkins 1994). Even more obvious is the spatial source in the case of the modern replacement *ar ti* (on the point of’) which draws on the conceptual metaphor of the beginning of a process as the crossing of a spatial boundary.

In the case of the perfect constructions, the spatial nature is somewhat less obvious, because spatial and temporal meanings existed side by side from very early on. *tar* ’after’, although ultimately of spatial origin etymologically, had developed the temporal meaning of ‘after’ as one of its primary functions already by the time of Old Irish. The later replacements, *tar éis* and *i ndiaidh*, are again both spatial in origin, consisting each of locative preposition (*tar ’across, *i ’in*) and a noun of concrete spatial meaning (*éis ’tracks, trace; diaidh < O.Ir. déad ’end point’). However, both had developed the purely temporal meaning of *after* as one of their functions well before they were co-opted to serve in the periphrastic perfect construction.

In English, the picture is much more mixed. The source of the standard progressive was a locative prepositional construction at least in parts (Middle English is *on huntinge* etc.), but that source had long ceased to be transparent by the time the grammaticalisation of the other, younger constructions set in. Of the two prepositional constructions that are shared marginally with Standard English, *about* and *for*, one comes from a source that is even formally quite unrelated to the *be + prep + V-ing* pattern. As discussed earlier, *be about V-ing* was a late replacement for a considerably older structure *be about to V*, where *about* was originally not a preposition but an adverb, and to *V* was a straightforward infinitive of purpose.

The other construction, *for*, is formally unambiguous as an instantiation of the *be + prep + V-ing* pattern. Its semantic source is one of destination and purpose; as such, it represents a similar grammaticalisation path as the *about* construction, namely that of volitive and obligatory modality towards futurity.

Thus, in Standard Modern English, unlike in Irish, it seems to have been only this modality-related grammaticalisation path that has been productive – and only marginally so – in developing structures of the prepositional type. The spatial grammaticalisation path, active in Irish, was no longer productive in standard English, and reflexes of it are found only in those constructions peculiar to Hiberno-English that were undoubtedly directly borrowed.

To conclude, the question is: can we causally link the development of these different constructions together at all? Taking an agnostic approach, we might be content with stating that *after (and possibly on)* were borrowed from Irish, whereas *for* and *about* existed independently. But is the replication of *after* related to the fact that *for* and *about* were preserved along with it? Conclusive empirical proof of such a hypothesis is hardly possible in principle, but a plausibility argument in its favour, based on cognitive theories of grammatical organisation, can be attempted.

The constructions in question can be described as formal idioms. Even though their semantics is transparently motivated by their combinatorial make-up to some degree, their behaviour is not entirely predictable and their licensing as a grammatical unit must be an object of specific, arbitrary knowledge. According to a construction-based approach to grammatical organisation such as Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2006; Croft 2001), such complex patterns are assumed to possess “unit status”, that is, to be represented as holistic entities in speakers’ internalised grammatical knowledge. Crucially, this holds not only for the individual constructions with specific prepositions; it may also hold for representations of the more abstract schema instantiated by each. In this way, Construction Grammar attempts to model the internalised knowledge that speakers possess about an abstract pattern’s productivity and frequency: the more prominent a pattern is in terms of productivity (the type frequency of its instantiations) and in terms of their token frequency, the more strongly it will become entrenched in memory. Thus, in the present case, Construction Grammar predicts that speakers will form representations of an abstract schema such as *be + preposition + gerund*, if this is supported by sufficient number and frequency of instantiations. What I am suggesting now, additionally, is that such categorisation processes, in the bilingual speaker, can cross the two linguistic repertoires. Representations of perceived schemata such as the prepositional schema discussed here can then become objects of what Weinreich (1953) called “interlingual identification”, and as such, they can become channels and carriers of analogy-driven convergence and replication (cf. Bisang 2001:188f.).

On this basis, we can now sketch the historical process we assume to have happened in Hiberno-English, roughly as follows. In Irish, at the time of contact with English, there already existed a large range of the prepositional constructions...
in question, all organised around the common cognitive schema related to the locative source semantics of the various prepositions involved. English speakers only had, at most, two such constructions (with about and for), and these were sufficiently dissimilar and isolated in the system that it is doubtful whether they would have led to the establishment of a common abstract categorisation with a separate unit status. In contact with Irish, however, bilingual speakers could perceive the similarities between these existing constructions and the Irish ones, and on this basis re-categorise and assimilate them as instantiations of a common productive schema.

At about the same time, bilinguals were creating the after and probably the on construction in English, on the model of Irish. In these instances, the transfer was evidently based on a perception of both functional and formal equivalence on the level of the individual lexical items. Whether this innovation was dependent on, or aided by, a prior strengthening effect regarding the other two constructions, or whether the sequence was rather the other way round, is a question that cannot be answered on the basis of the historical data. In any case, both the constructions that were downright borrowed on the lexical level, and those constructions that already existed in English, ultimately served as input into the same new emergent category, the be + preposition + V-ing pattern in Hiberno-English. It was ultimately this abstract categorisation that was “borrowed” from Irish into English, along with the specific instantiation of the after perfect, and this act of abstract replication was what caused the existing for and about constructions to become strengthened and preserved in use along with their new sibling, the after perfect.

References


On verbal aspect in Irish, with particular reference to the Progressive.


