A Comparison of a Generic Generative Grammar and Role and Reference Grammar: Modern Irish*

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This project is an investigation into the phenomenon of VSO in Modern Irish from two theoretical perspectives. In this project, I examine both analyses for Modern Irish VSO, pointing out the explanatory adequacy of both theories. I also note that under a RRG analysis, VSO is probably not the best analysis for Modern Irish, suggesting TSO (tense-subject-object) as a possibly better explanation of some phenomena regarding the verbs in Modern Irish. These phenomena are some that generative grammars have used to argue for an underlying SVO, but I favor the TSO analysis because of consistencies in the phenomenon that are particular to tense rather than to verbs.

1 Introduction

Verb-initial languages comprise approximately ten percent of the world’s languages (Carnie and Guilfoyle 2000, p. 3). This is both a small and a significant percentage. It is small enough that it would be odd to posit verb-initiality as the cornerstone of a syntactic theory but significant enough to be included in explanations offered by syntactic theories. This paper is a description of two such explanations as offered by two different syntactic theories, a generic Principles and Parameters x-bar theory and Role and Reference Grammar (RRG), for VSO languages. To keep this project within reasonable limits, I will further limit this description to explanations offered for Modern Irish (via Old Irish in one case, to be explained later). Modern Irish has many interesting syntactic quirks; to avoid writing a book-length work, I will attempt to resist the temptation to follow the numerous possible rabbit trails. This will not be about specific critiques of either theory. It will simply be a presentation of the ideas of their respective proponents. Because of the relatively recent development of RRG, I

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may need to posit some details on my own, but I will not be altering the theory and will apply its principles to the phenomena under examination. Note that I have numbered the examples consecutively throughout; these numberings may not reflect those of the sources from which I drew them.

2 A Generative Theory

In a standard generative theory as presented in Carnie (2002), sentences with VSO (verb-subject-object) order cannot be generated (p. 199). There are a couple of ways to approach this. The first is to abandon the binary branching restriction and claim that the V, S, and O are all sisters under the same head (p. 200). The problem with this from a generative standpoint is that it makes the S and O structural equals, and thus grammatical equals, indistinguishable from one another.

However, this prediction of indistinguishability is not borne out by the evidence. The O is in fact treated as if it is a constituent of the verb, testable by coordination and clefting, which show the constituency of the O (Carnie 2002, p. 201). Were the O and S indistinguishable, it should be possible to interpret the S as O and the O as S, but these are impossible:

(1) Tá Máire [ag-pógáil an lucharachán] agus [ag-goidúaór].
   Is Mary [ing-kiss the leprechaun] and [ing-steal his gold].
   Mary is kissing the leprechaun and stealing his gold.

(2) Is [ag-pógáil an lucharachán] atá Máire.
   It-is [ing-kiss the leprechaun] that.be Mary.
   It’s kissing the leprechaun that Mary is. [Mary is kissing the leprechaun.]

In the first, the gender of the pronoun in the second bracketed phrase indicates that Mary must be stealing from the leprechaun, not from herself, and the parallelism of the conjoined phrases shows their constituency as distinct from the S. In the second, the cleft construction is analyzed by Carnie (2002, p. 201) as being movement—the O has moved to be prior to the S and moves with its part of the V to do that; there is no splitting of the proposed constituent to be moved in front of the S.

This evidence of constituency of the V and O is what prevents generative theories from maintaining a triple-branching structure to account for VSO. There is a way to save that analysis, however, at least in theory: make the S and O distinguishable for characteristics other than structural characteristics. Anderson and Chung (in Cole and Saddock 1977, p. 3) suggest understanding S and O as primitives of clause structure, “the basic relations that determine the makeup of clauses.” Thus, the S would be distinguished because it acts like an S—Mary does the kissing and stealing as agent; the leprechaun is the one kissed and stolen from, as undergoer. They described the difficulty of getting a VP constituent in VSO languages, and this was their justification for suggesting grammatical primitives based on semantics, rather than relations to the verb or positions on the tree. This approach would fall well outside the standard requirements of x-bar theory, but I mention it to be clear that the success or failure of
any given proposed solution is more a function of the theory than of whether a
solution can be made to work. Because x-bar theory posits constituency based on
hierarchical positions, a semantic explanation would be unaccepta ble.

This separation of syntax from semantics drives the generative theorist to propose
strictly syntactic solutions. Triple branching is not an option in this theory
(canonically—I was shocked and horrified to see it used to cover case-checking for
certain raising phenomena in Carnie’s 2002 book, p. 265) because it leads to incorrect
predictions about the O and S in VSO languages; therefore, a solution must be found
to accommodate the usual binary, hierarchical relationships that will result in a VP
constituent and a VSO word order.

True to Principles and Parameters (P&P) generative form, it takes a movement
rule. Underlying SVO order is assumed so as to have a VP constituent, but from there,
there are a number of options, the favored ones being types of V raising; the argument
for underlying SVO is made largely from complex constructions such as the
following:

(3) B’hfearr liom [tú fanacht sa bhaile inniu].
   COP.better with.1sing you remain.INF at home today.
   I would rather you remain at home today.

This analysis depends on the x-bar grouping of the second person pronoun being with
the infinitival verb in the next clause; this is required in a P&P generative theory, so
that every verb has a subject, but if the second person pronoun were grouped with the
main clause as being the second argument of the verb, this argument for underlying
SVO would fail. In simple sentences, the verb or a tensed element is always first in the
sentence, as in:

(4) D’fhan Séan sa bhaile inniu.
   Stay.PAST Sean at home today
   Sean stayed at home today.

The descriptions I offer here are largely argued by Carnie, et al., on the basis of
Old Irish. The same case can be made for Modern Irish (and the writers claim more
generality for their analysis than simply for Old Irish), but Old Irish is often more
obvious about options because of a slightly richer morphology. Many of the same
structures and phenomena remain in Modern Irish; I will make clear when an author
appealed to Old Irish examples.

The first is that V raises to C°. This is a version of head movement. “There is a
requirement in VSO languages that C°’s be filled, but the speciﬁer of CP need not be
filled” (Carnie, et. al., in Carnie and Guilfoyle 2000, p. 41). This is shown in tree form
in 5.

Another proposal of this type is that the V moves to the left edge of the
inflectional complex (ibid.)—either way, the V ends up to the left of S and O, and
there is a verb trace left behind between S and O that allows for the V and O to act as a constituent.

(5)

\[
\text{CP} \\
\text{C} \\
\text{IP} \\
\text{Sbj} \\
\text{I'} \\
\text{Infl} \\
\text{VP} \\
\text{Verb} \\
\text{Object}
\]

The third is that V raises to AgrS. The idea here depends on the idea of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ features, as argued for in Modern Irish. There are a number of critiques to be made of the notion of strong/weak, but that is not at issue here. As Guilfoyle puts it (in Carnie and Guilfoyle 2000, p. 63-4) puts it:

. . . V raises to Agr S, and the subject raises to the specifier of TP in finite clauses. V-movement is driven by the requirement that the strong V- and N-features borne by Tense and Agreement heads are checked by spellout. Strong V-features are checked when the verb raises to the feature-bearing heads by spellout, while strong N-features are checked when an appropriate NP raises to the specifier of the feature bearing [sic] head by spellout.

Here is a tree to illustrate that idea:

(6)

\[
\text{AgrSP} \\
\text{AgrS'} \\
\text{AgrS} \\
\text{V_i} \\
\text{TP} \\
\text{NP_j} \\
\text{T'} \\
\text{T} \\
\text{t'} \\
\text{AgrOP} \\
\text{npk} \\
\text{AgrO'} \\
\text{AgrO} \\
\text{VP} \\
\text{t_i} \\
\text{t_j} \\
\text{V'} \\
\text{V} \\
\text{N} \\
\text{t_i} \\
\text{t_k}
\]
So everyone’s features are checked, and all is well with the world—VSO for tensed clauses is achieved.

Finally, it is possible that V raising is driven not by specifically syntactic motivations but by information structure, keeping a “strict mapping between topic-focus structure and the surface syntax” (Carnie and Guilfoyle 2000, p. 9). Once again, however, I must point out that in a syntactic theory in which grammatical functions are defined by position in a hierarchy, it seems questionable to introduce discourse principles. Nevertheless, it is an attractive suggestion, because, as will be noted later, full Irish subjects must be agentive.

The other two approaches would be to lower the S from SVO to VSO; this assumes that Case is assigned only to the right of the V—and to propose O postposing from a VOS underlying structure (Carnie and Guilfoyle 2000, p. 6-7).

V-raising is the favored approach because of the way VP ellipsis happens in Modern Irish. When the V raises,

\[ \ldots \text{there exists a constituent which consists of the subject, the trace of the verb, and the object.} \ldots \text{Irish has a process of VP ellipsis which parallels English VP ellipsis in many ways. It differs from English VP ellipsis, however, in what is deleted. In English, the subject obligatorily remains, but the verb and the object (and any other VP-internal material) are elided and replaced with did} \ldots \text{In Irish, on the other hand, the verb is the one element that is not elided} \ldots : \]

(7) Duirt mé go gceannéadh sí é aguo cheannaigh
Said I that would.buy she it and bought
I said that she would buy it and she did.

Not all V-raising possibilities are created equal, however; the \( V \rightarrow C^o \) hypothesis runs into problems when the V is first even in CPs in which the \( C^o \) is already filled:

(8) Ceapaim [go bhafaca sé an madra].
Think.PRES.1.Sing [that see.PST he.NOM the dog]
I think that he saw the dog. (Carnie, et al., in Carnie and Guilfoyle 2000, p. 42)

The V cannot raise to \( C^o \) in the embedded clause because the \( C^o \) is filled, but the V still precedes the S and the O.

Carnie et al. (ibid., p. 45) provide some morphological evidence (from Old Irish) to argue that the \( V \rightarrow C^o \) is the way to go.

The absolute form is used when the inflected verb is not preceded by any conjunct particles, preverbs, or pronouns:

(9) Beirid in fer in claideb
Carries.3Sing.ABS the man the sword
The man carries the sword.
The conjunct form is used when the verb is preceded by a conjunct particle (complementizer) or preverb:

(10) Ní \(\text{beir} \) /*\(\text{beirid} \) in fer in claideb (conjunct)
    NEG carries.3Sing.CONJ/*ABS the man the sword
    The man does not carry the sword.

Interestingly, the appearance of the conjunct verb form is not necessarily a function of the presence of the preverbs or conjunct particles. Rather, the conjunct form is found anywhere that the verb is not in absolute first position.

The clause structures for the above examples are given on p. 46 (ibid.):

(11) [CP Ní [IP beiri + Infl [IP in fer [VP ti in claideb.]]]
    [CP Beiridi + C° [IP ti [VP in fer [V'' ti in claideb.]]]]

When incorporated into a null C°, the verb becomes absolute. This does not work in relative clauses, where the absolute form of the verb shows which null C° ([±wh]) is in complementizer position:

(12) Is oinferi [CP Φi gaibesi [IP ti búaid.]]
    COP one-man OP.grabs-3Sing-REL victory
    It is one man who grabs victory. (ibid., p. 46)

Carnie, et al., (ibid., p. 46) suggests the following conclusion:

Since the verb forms in absolute initial position vary depending upon what type of complementizer is present in the clause, this data lends [sic] support to the theory that these verbs are in fact in C°.

In a footnote on pp. 56-7 (ibid.), the writers note that imperatives appear in absolute first position but are in conjunct form. They do not argue for a specific solution to this discrepancy but suggest that perhaps there is a "null imperative complementizer, which blocks raising of the verb to C°", leaving to verb to raise only as far as the left of Infl.

One other major argument is made for the filled C° requirement, that of clitic placement in Old Irish (ibid. p. 51-2):

. . . sometimes they precede the verb (when there is a preverb or conjunct particle); other times they follow the verb (when the verb is absolute). . . . The distribution of enclitics is transparent when we assume that Old Irish had a filled C° requirement . . . :

Enclitics (E adjoins to C°)
A Comparison of a Generic Generative Grammar and Role and Reference Grammar: Modern Irish

(13) Ní-m- accai (Ní + m + ad + cí-3Sing)
    NEGme P.see.3Sing C E P V-S
    She does not see me.

(14) At-on-cí (ad + (do)n + cí-3Sing)
    P-1PL. see.3Sing P E V-S
    She sees us.

(15) Bertaig -th -i. (bertaig – th + I)
    Shake-3Sing.ABS-him
    He shakes him.

So once again, a generative theory proves equal to the task of explaining some unexpected phenomena in Irish.

To conclude this section, I note that the generative account of VSO can work. There are a number of speed bumps along the way, but x-bar theory is (almost) as flexible as the people who use it, and the goal of accounting for VSO in Modern Irish has been achieved. In the next section, I present an RRG explanation of Modern Irish VSO.

3 RRG

Because RRG begins with different assumptions, I will not be writing this as an RRG-style reply to generative theory. Rather, I will present an RRG take on VSO; many of the issues generative theories have to explain do not arise in RRG. When necessary, I will refer to the previous sections.

One major problem RRG avoids is how to get from an underlying SVO to a surface VSO. In RRG, what you see is what you get, and that saves having to justify an underlying SVO or explaining how the language went from SVO to VSO; below is a representation of such a structure, using a sentence from McCloskey (1979, p. 141):

(16) a.

```
SENTENCE
  
CLAUSE
    
CORE
      
NUC ARG ARG
      
PRED NP NP
        V

Bhuail sí go tobann é
Struck he suddenly him
He suddenly struck him.
```
The problem for flattish structures, however, is how to get constituent-behavior for the V and O when the S is at the same structural level as the O and is closer to the V. By itself, this would not provide a distinction between S and O, and as pointed out in examples in the generative sections, there are reasons to posit something like a VP constituent. Without movement rules, there needs to be a way to connect the V and O while leaving the S between them. The way to get this is through discourse-pragmatic focus domain: “. . . the focus domain . . . corresponds to what would be a VP in an x-bar [generative] analysis” (VanValin in progress, ch. 3). In the sentence above, the topic would be the first NP, and the focus domain would be the V and the second NP. This is not tremendously interesting in a sentence this simple except that it requires a split focus domain:

(16) b.  

On the other hand, it is possible for the contentful subject (the agent—more on this later) to be out of canonical and functional subject position in Irish sentences. A dummy subject is inserted, and the object becomes both the focus and the topic; the subject in my bracketed translation is subordinated in the cleft construction; it is no longer the topic., as in the following, as cited previously:

It-is [ing-kiss the leprechaun] that.be Mary.  
It’s kissing the leprechaun that Mary is. [Mary is kissing the leprechaun.]

In this case, the focus domain would not be split. The dummy subject is not realized overtly but is included in the lexical information of the verbal element at the beginning of the sentence, so there is nothing to interrupt a continuous focus domain. Here are the representations of both constructions:
One way around the split-focus-domain hypothesis is to say that the initial verbal particle is part of the functional projection, not part of the constituent projection. In that case, there would be a splitting of logical parts of the predicate, but in moving the verbal piece up a notch to be a daughter of a (daughter of a) clause, we could avoid both a splitting of the predicate and a splitting of the functional domain. What this does, however, is to make Modern Irish into an SVO language because the verbal element is now outside the core, a proposal that does not jive with the evidence—in sentences without the split predicate, the verb is still in initial position, as in the following example as cited previously:

(7) Duirt mé go gceannédh sí é aguo cheannaigh
    Said I that would.buy she it and bought
    I said that she would buy it and she did.
The other option is to link the initial verbal element functionally to the construction in the nucleus projection, thusly:

(20)

\[
\text{SENTENCE} \\
\text{CLAUSE} \\
\text{CORE} \\
\text{ARG} \quad \text{NUC} \quad \text{ARG} \\
\text{NP} \quad \text{PRED} \quad \text{NP} \\
\text{V} \\
\text{Tá Máire ag-pógáil an lucharachán} \\
\text{ASP} \quad \text{NUC} \\
\text{CORE} \\
\text{TNS/IF} \quad \text{CLAUSE} \\
\text{SENTENCE}
\]

This would leave modern Irish as functionally VSO, although with the main predicate being between the S and the O, it strongly suggests primarily SVO order. That can be solved by suggesting that the verbal element is primary: What this looks like is that the V may not be the critical factor in the word order: the tensed element is the first element in the sentence, and the V always precedes the O—this also works with stative negations (see 24) and with the topicalized objects, as described previously.

As can be seen above, trying to keep the tensed element in the predicate is odd. I would prefer to stay with something like the previous analysis and add illocutionary force to the tense marker; negated sentences would support this analysis because the verbal negation always occurs in the initial position, and when a verb is negated, the verbal elements as shown thus far do not occur; additional evidence for calling these verbal elements the illocutionary force is the morphological marking in Old Irish, in which case the absolute and conjunct suffixes would be illocutionary force markings, and questioned negations as given below (first two examples from Stenson 1981, p. 93; last as cited previously):

(21) Ní lia é.
    Not surgeon he
    He is not a surgeon.
(22) Nach lia é?
Q-not surgeon he
Isn’t he a surgeon?

(23) Ní-m- accai
NEGme P.see.3Sing
She does not see me.

(24)

It would be somewhat strange to suggest that the basic word order of a language differs depending on which projection one looks at, but here we are: VSO in the operator projection and SVO in the constituent projection, unless the illocutionary force operator is not a distinct element, in which case the constituent projection is also VSO. A way to explain this is to claim, as I suggested (based on comments provided by Van Valin), that the tensed element comes first in the sentence with the V always preceding the O; this gives a different form for tense/aspect, which has been proposed in an unpublished work on Ewe. Thus, rather than being VSO, Modern Irish would be TSO (Tense Subject Object). This could lead to the proposal of differing templates, depending on the construction. In the example of the topicalized O, the S can be relativized to the focus domain because it was originally part of the potential focus domain (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997, p. 629). In the example of the elision in relative...
clauses, the object and subject can both be elided because, if the relative clause were a sentence unto itself, both the O and the S are clearly assertions about the O and the S, respectively (ibid.); because only agents can be subjects, there is no ambiguity about which is which in the interpretation of the elision.

There is an interesting treatment of stative and passive verbs in Irish. As I mentioned in passing, Irish subjects, unless dumfified for specific constructions, are strongly agentive. In fact, only agents can be full subjects. In cases in which no agents are possible in the logical structure of a verb, as in stative verbs and passives, the sentences lack subjects. In the former, the person or thing that is in a state is used with a preposition; in the latter, the pronominal undergoer remains in undergoer case, even when it is the only pronoun in the sentence. The first example is from Guilfoyle (in Carnie and Guilfoyle 2000, p. 67), and the second is from McCloskey (1979, p. 141).

(25) Tá eagla orm
    Is fear on1Sing
    I am afraid. / Fear is on me.

(26) Buaileah é
    Was.struck him
    He was struck.

McCloskey (ibid.) noted that the functional behavior of the pronoun in examples such as the one immediately previous retains properties of O-type behavior:

> The pronoun in such a clause continues to act like a direct object with respect to the rule of Relative Deletion—that is, in a relative or questioned clause it can be optionally deleted or retained... .

To limn, as for x-bar theory, RRG can be tweaked, more or less forcefully, to account for the Irish data. I have not always been pleased with what I have had to propose for the tweaking, but as I say, it can be made to work, and it led to the proposal of TSO structure for Modern Irish as a way to account for a variety of data.

4 Conclusion

This project was a presentation of two theories of syntax using Irish word order as a case study. I think would be helpful in conclusion to summarize some of the main differences between the two theories:
<table>
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<th>X-Bar</th>
<th>RRG</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical—grammatical relations are defined as positions on the hierarchy</td>
<td>Non-hierarchical—grammatical relations are defined with regard to logical structure and grammatical functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement rules—any element can move anywhere as necessary</td>
<td>No movement rules—elements are related at levels of scope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface and deep structures need not correspond—movement rules get the language from the latter to the former</td>
<td>Surface structure all there is—if a language is VSO, it’s VSO</td>
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There are a lot of fun phenomena waiting to be explored in Irish; I have been often disappointed by having to limit the possible constructions explored here. However, I leave the book-length work to another time.

**References:**


Van Valin, Jr., Robert D., [Wating for a Title], in progress.