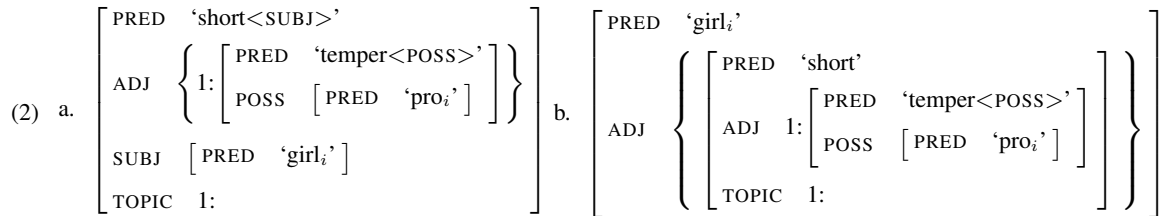


Synchronic, diachronic and cross-linguistic aspects of Welsh ‘Possessor Promotion’

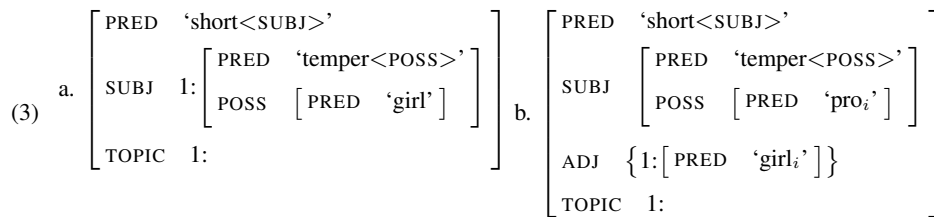
In this paper we examine, under synchronic, diachronic and cross-linguistic perspectives, a Welsh AP construction that can neutrally be described as consisting of an adjective followed by an NP containing a possessive clitic pronoun. It can be used both predicatively as in (1a) and attributively as in (1b). The post-adjectival NP serves to delimit the respect in which the adjective denotes a property of the SUBJ in (1a) and the head noun in (1b). The clitic pronoun agrees in PERS/NUM/GEND with the SUBJ or head noun and shows all the characteristics of being anaphorically bound by it.¹

- (1) a. *Mae ’r ferch yn fyr ei thymher.*
 is the girl.F.SG PRED short.(M.SG) POSS.3SG.F temper.F.SG
 ‘The girl is short-tempered.’
- b. *merch fyr / *fer ei thymher*
 girl.F.SG short.(M.SG) / *short.F.SG POSS.3SG.F temper.F.SG
 ‘a short-tempered girl’

The main question that this construction raises is the syntactic status of the post-adjectival NP. We argue that it should be analysed as a topicalized adjunct in view of its function to delimit the adjective’s meaning ‘in respect of N’; (2) shows the resulting f-structures for (1a,b).



The construction is interesting in terms of both language change and cross-linguistic parallels. We believe that it represents a reanalysis of a construction in which a constituent’s POSSessor was first topicalized and subsequently promoted to SUBJ, necessitating a demotion of the erstwhile SUBJ. (3) shows the f-structures for a “basic” sentence like *The girl’s temper is short* and its variant with a topicalized, adjunctival POSS (*As for the girl, her temper is short*). The difference between (3b) and (2a) is that SUBJ and ADJ have changed places—the result of promotion of the topicalized POSS and concomitant demotion of the SUBJ of (3 b).



Support for this proposed re-analysis comes from certain Welsh constructions with topicalized (or focused) constituents. A subset of LDD constructions in Welsh require the presence of anaphorically bound, resumptive pronouns, including relative clauses with a topicalized possessor; a resumptive pronoun appears at the “extraction site”. (4) gives an example for a copular relative clause from Middle Welsh (which differs from Modern Welsh in word order and selection of relative particles)² in which the TOPIC could straightforwardly be the SUBJ (‘whose growth and size’) but which offers little resistance to reanalysis in which the possessor is promoted to SUBJ (and hence TOPIC).³

¹“The thing or quality denoted by the [post-adjectival NP] pertains to or is a part of the person or object denoted by [the SUBJ or head noun], the latter being represented by the poss[essive] pronoun” (Mac Cana, 1966, p. 91).

²Modern Welsh no longer allows the word order Copula-Predicate-Subject that underlies the first reading of (4), and requires the relative particle *y(r)* in “genitival” relative clauses, restricting *a* to SUBJ and (certain) OBJs. (4) is possible in (somewhat antiquated) Modern Welsh, but only with the second reading.

³The verb is usually 3SG if the (nominal) SUBJ or antecedent is PL; 3SG *uei* therefore does not disambiguate (4).

- (4) *mab [...] a uei uawr y dwf a'e ueint*
 boy REL was great POSS.3SG.M growth and=POSS.3SG.M size
 'a boy [...] whose growth and size were great' / 'a boy who was great of growth and size'

We further suggest that the Welsh construction does in fact have linguistic parallels and near-parallels elsewhere. Similar constructions are usually treated as (subtypes of) External Possessor (or: “possessor raising”) Constructions “in which a semantic possessor-possesum relation is expressed coding the possessor [...] as a core grammatical relation of the verb and in a constituent separate from that which contains the possesum” (Payne and Barshi, 1999, p. 3). Typically, the external possessor surfaces as an apparent extra-argument of intransitive and transitive verbs, “making” them transitive or ditransitive. However, copular sentences seem to be a special case (in Welsh and some other languages) in that the possessor does not appear as an extra argument but replaces (and displaces) the possesum as SUBJ, which thereby loses its argument status,⁴ leaving the SUBJ as about the only targetable core grammatical function for the external possessor. Of especial interest are languages in which the topicalized possessor is “not yet” integrated into the verb’s argument structure such as Tz’utujil (Aissen, 1999). Aissen suggests, for (5a), an analysis that corresponds to the f-structure in (3b), with ‘bull’ as the “logical subject” (\approx TOPIC), and ‘testicles’ as the “grammatical subject”. In sum, Aissen’s discussion indicates a number of significant points of similarity with the grammar of Celtic languages (which cannot be elaborated here) which inform our analysis.

A second question posed by the construction concerns adjective agreement. In Modern Welsh, the adjective in the construction must always be in a (default) MASC SG form where such exists (note the ungrammaticality of FSG agreement in (1b) for example). In Modern Standard Arabic an attributive adjective agrees with the modified noun in case and definiteness, but with the (we presume) topicalized nominal adjunct in gender and number, as shown in (5c). Both these unusual agreement patterns are, we believe, likely to be reflexes of the SUBJ switch and a concomitant agreement conflict, resolved in different ways in Welsh and Arabic. Synchronically we suggest that the presence of a topicalized adjunct blocks “marked” adjectival FEM SG and (gender-indifferent) PL forms in Welsh,⁵ whereas in Arabic the mixed agreement reflects a difference of CONCORD and INDEX agreement.

- (5) a. *Ja jun wajkax le' qas ee nimaq r-aab' aaj*
 the a bull DEM very 3PL big.PL POSS.3SG-testicles
 'The bull has very big testicles.' (Tz'utujil, cf. Aissen (1999, pp. 180-1))
- b. *[ra'aytu] imra'at-an ġamīl-an waġhu-hā.*
 [saw.1SG] woman.F.SG.ACC.IDF beautiful.M.SG.ACC.IDF face.M.SG.NOM.DEF=her
 '[I saw] a woman with a beautiful face.' (Modern Standard Arabic, cf. Kremers (2003))

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⁴Constructions where the possessor appears as some OBJ-TH as in Latin *mihi est X* ‘to me is X’ or as the object of a preposition (‘with me is X’) seem to be a different case. Interestingly Breton and Cornish, close relatives of Welsh, “created” a transitive (and auxiliary!) verb ‘have’ out of what is clearly ‘to-me-is’ morphological material (and preserving most of it in the process). There can be no doubt here that at some stage the original OBJ-TH was promoted to SUBJ.

⁵Cf. Dalrymple and Nikolaeva (2007) for the influence of discourse functions on agreement.