Productivity in Verbal Noun Formation in Irish:
Some Problems Concerning the Investigation of the Spread of the *-áil* Suffix

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This paper attempts to present some of the problems concerning the investigation of the spread of the verbal noun forming suffix –áil in Irish. This suffix used to be just one of the suffixes with which verbal nouns were formed in earlier stages of the Irish language; however, today it is basically the only productive verbal noun forming suffix in this language.

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1. Introduction

Bloch-Trojnar in her book on verbal nouns in Modern Irish states that "[d]espite efforts made by various linguists Irish morphology (especially word-formation) remains in many respects an uncharted area" (2005: 227). Apart from her work, the only other book published on Irish word-formation is Aidan Doyle's *Noun Derivation in Modern Irish* (1992). Both of these books deal with certain aspects of Irish word-formation from a synchronic point of view, and so do about a dozen or so articles on the topic. The only book published to date on the history of the Irish language from the beginnings to the end of the century, *Stair na Gaeilge* (and its English translation), mostly deals with inflectional morphology, and to a lesser extent with phonology from a diachronic point of view. This is of course understandable, as Old Irish (8th-9th centuries) had a highly complex inflectional morphology which gradually became greatly simplified in the course of the centuries. Moreover, Rudolf Thurneysen in his seminal work, *A Grammar of Old Irish* (1980; first printed in English in 1946), gives a thorough description of word formation in Old Irish. Thus, Irish word-formation from a diachronic point of view, especially the developments between the Old Irish and the modern periods, has not received too much attention so far, although the extensive amount of written material surviving from the 8th century onwards makes Irish one of the best documented medieval languages in Europe.

2. Problems

There are some problems that a scholar doing research in this field will encounter that will not present a problem to somebody working with the history of the English language, for example. First of all, a considerable part of the early Irish material (8th-12th centuries) has not been digitized yet, so we cannot use a sizeable corpus for our research. The lack of carefully compiled corpora is a great drawback when one would want to conduct an investigation on word frequencies. What is available is the electronic edition of the *Dictionary of the Irish Language: Based Mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials* (*DIL*; electronic version: *eDIL*), which is essential for anyone working with early Irish, as it contains tens of thousands of quotations from the early language. However, when using this dictionary, one immediately encounters a second problem: namely, that of dating. In *DIL*

only the titles of the texts are given beside the occurrences of certain forms, and not the dates. This is because for most texts we only know the date of the manuscripts in which they survive; however, in several cases linguistic evidence shows that there may be a gap of several centuries between the linguistic features of a text and the date of the manuscript. Thus many texts would be referred to by scholars working in the field as "dated to the 13th c. by X, dated to the 14th c. by Y", etc. This of course may cause problems concerning certain forms that one would want to investigate: are we dealing with a new, innovative form originating at the date of the composition of the text, or is the new form one substituted by the scribe for the older one when he was copying the text from another manuscript? (For this reason, rhyming examples can be very useful, as they may give information on the given linguistic form at the time of composition.) This brings us to the third problem: because of the effective colonization of Ireland by England from the 16th century on, hardly any books were printed in Irish until the middle of the 19th(!) century. Thus Irish texts survive almost exclusively in manuscripts – even ones written after the 15th century! (Scribes still existed in the 19th century in Ireland.) What is more, many of these texts have not been edited yet, because the number of scholars working in this field is a fraction of those working on the history of the English language.

3. The suffix *–áil*

In this paper the following, widely accepted periodization of the Irish language will be used: Old Irish (8th and 9th centuries with a more or less fixed literary language); Middle Irish (10th-12th centuries – with no fixed standard and the texts displaying great variation) – Old and Middle Irish are often referred to together as Early Irish (8th-12th centuries); Early Modern Irish (13th-mid-17th centuries) – the official literary language of this period is called Classical Modern Irish; Modern Irish (since the mid-17th century on).

The only really productive verbal noun forming suffixes in the Old Irish period seem to have been the ones for secondary (= weak) verbs: *-ad/-ath* for a-verbs and *–iud/-iuth/-ud/-uth* for i-verbs (Thurneysen, 1980: 446-447). A great number of these verbal noun forms of course still exist in Modern Irish.

The intriguing fact is that the OIr form of *–áil, -ál*[1], was not widespread: it served as the verbal noun forming suffix of a single verb, *gaibid* ('lays hold of, grasps'; 'goes'), and of its "numerous compounds" (Thurneysen 455). How did this suffix, which was not productive and widespread in the OIr period, come to oust the productive verbal noun forming suffixes, and how did the present-day situation come about when today it is basically the only productive verbal noun forming suffix used with new verbs? Since the mid-19th century, various linguists have noted the extensive use of *–áil* and of the corresponding adjectival suffix *–áilte* in various Irish dialects, the former of which can be attached to basically any verbal root borrowed from English, while the latter to any adjectival root borrowed from English (Ó Cuív, 1980: 126). (It has to be noted here that the source of new words in Irish for the past 150 years or so has been almost exclusively English.)

It also has to be noted that the verbal noun has played and still plays a very important role in Irish syntax: Irish, having no infinitive, often makes use of the verbal noun in structures where other languages would use the infinitive (e.g. the underlined infinitives in English sentences such as "I can swim", "I would like to read this book" would have to be expressed with the verbal noun in Irish).

The only scholar to date who attempted to trace the spread of the verbal noun forming suffix *-áil* in detail was Brian Ó Cuív in his seminal article entitled 'The Verbal Noun Ending *–áil* and Related Forms' (1980). This article is excellent partly because it tries to answer several questions through the presentation of a fairly extensive collection of data, and partly because it triggers further questions to be answered by further research. Some of these questions are the following:

1) Can new data be added to those presented by Ó Cuív?

2) Can the dating of some of the data be revised/made more accurate?

3) Can new reasons be presented for the spread of the *–áil* morpheme?

I believe that the answer to all of the questions above is 'yes'; however, further meticulous research is needed to present the necessary evidence to support the answers to the questions above. More investigations would especially be necessary in the following areas:

a) The frequency of the verbal noun of *gaibid* and those of its compounds, and the various forms derived from these verbal nouns in the early texts.

b) The productivity of various kinds of verbal noun forming suffixes in Middle Irish.

c) Present-day variation in verbal noun forms in the various Modern Irish dialects; the tracing of each form as far back as possible.

In what follows, I would like to highlight some of the research problems concerning the verbal noun forms in *–áil* that occur in section III of the *Irish Grammatical Tracts (IGT)*, a work that was intended to instruct poets in the linguistic forms that they were expected to use when composing poetry[2]. The dating of the tracts is problematic; the earliest manuscripts in which section III survives come from the 16th century (McManus, 1994: 337); however, the date of the manuscript does not really shed light on the actual date of the composition of the text.

Section III of the *Irish Grammatical Tracts* lists the irregular verbs of the language under the heading of their verbal noun. Apart from the Early Modern Irish forms of the Old Irish verbal nouns of *gaibid* and its compounds, the following verbal nouns appear with the *–áil* ending, which forms can be considered new ones as compared with Old Irish:

admáil (*IGT* iii §68, Modern Irish [Mod. Ir.] *admháil*) 'act of admitting' for earlier *aititiu* (verbal noun of Old Irish *ad-daim*, 'admits'), *damáil* (*ibid.* §25, Mod. Ir. *dámhachtain*), 'act of enduring, suffering; act of submitting to a judgement' for earlier *détiu*, *déide* (verbal noun of Old Irish *daimid*, 'endures, suffers; submits to judgement'), *tegmáil* (*ibid.* §2, Mod. Ir. *teagmháil*) 'happening, occurring' for earlier *tecmang/tecmac* (verbal noun of Old Irish *do-ecmaing*, 'happens') and *teasdáil/teasbháil* (*ibid.* §10, Mod. Ir. *teastáil)* 'lacking, wanting' for earlier *tesbuith/tesbaid* (verbal noun of Old Irish *do-easta, -teasta*) (see McManus, 1994: 418). Note that of these four forms, the latter three appear in separate entries in *IGT* iii, and the first one, *admáil*, is merely listed under the section headed by *naidmeadh* ('binding').

The earliest attestations of these forms in *–áil* are extremely difficult to date for the reasons mentioned earlier. They are definitely attested in works contained in manuscripts from the Early Modern period; however, one can not tell with certainty if any of those forms had existed in the Middle Irish period, perhaps with the exception of *admáil* and *tecmáil* (see Ó Cuív, 1980: 131-132 and the examples cited in *eDIL* under the entries for these two verbal nouns). Another approach would be to try and date the last attestations of the earlier forms. This is also difficult for the same reasons, as some of the texts that survive in manuscripts from the Early Modern period can be dated back to the Middle Irish period. However, occasionally an interesting insight can be gained into the competition between the old and the new form: for example, as mentioned above, although in *IGT* iii §68 *admáil* appears, the

reflex of the older form, *aididi*, is found in section ii of *IGT* (§2) where noun declensions are discussed, and an example fixed by rhyme is also cited ("ní thabuir cách aididi d'Áed . faididi in fer" – example 168). Variation between the earlier and new form of the verbal noun of Old Irish *do-ecmang*, for example, can be found in the same prose text, *In Cath Catharda* ('The Civil War'), the Middle Irish translation of the Latin work *Bellum Civile* (Lucan's epic poem). The older form (highlighted in italics) appears in line 4908: "beith tria *tecmang* ⅂ tre turcora conaigh airechtus ... do beith aicci"; while the form in –*áil* appears in line 5110: "mo *teccmáil* ... eter lamaib ... mo muintire" (*eDIL*, entry on *tecmáil* and on *tecmang*).

The problem is further complicated by the obvious competition of some verbal noun forming suffixes: The new form of Old Irish *déitiu* is *damthain/dámachtain* in Middle Irish (although the latter seems to be very poorly attested – see the entry on *dámachtain* in *eDIL*); however, these forms do not appear in *IGT*, where only *damáil* is listed (Ó Cuív, 1980: 132). In Modern Irish, the competition seems to have been won by *dámhachtain*, as this is the form given in the Ó Dónaill dictionary (*Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, 1977)[3].

Furthermore, in *IGT* ii, which deals with noun declension, two forms appear where the –*áil* suffix is added to loan stems: *bródáil* (*IGT* ii §42, Mod. Ir. *bróidnéireacht* 'embroidery') and *inntráil* (*ibid.* §13, Mod. Ir. *iontráil* 'act of entering') (see McManus, 1994: 418). These are very interesting for the fact that they did not seem to have a corresponding verbal stem in Early Modern Irish to which the –*áil* suffix could have been attached. Irish speakers seem to have taken a somewhat altered English form and attached the –*áil* to them. Again, the existence of competition between verbal noun forming suffixes (and verb forming suffixes) seems to be indicated by the fact that in Ó Dónaill's dictionary the modern verbal noun for 'embroidery' is *bróidnéireacht* (connected to the verb *bróidnigh*), and not the form in –*áil*. In the case of *inntráil*, another intriguing development can be seen: namely, that with the spread of forms containing an English stem and the Irish suffix –*áil* which were functioning as verbal nouns, for the first time a group of verbs arose where the stem (i.e. the imperative singular 2 form of the verb) and its verbal noun were <u>identical</u> in form (e.g. Modern Irish *iontráil* 'enter', 'act of entering'; *sábháil* 'save', 'act of saving'). What seems to have happened is that a form functioning as a verbal noun was created according to the pattern 'stem from English + -*áil*', which then started functioning as a verb stem via the word-formation process of conversion, to which the regular inflectional endings of finite verb forms could be added. However, it has to be pointed out again that the competition between verbal noun forming suffixes in Middle, Early Modern and Modern Irish (the reflexes of which are amply attested in the variation of verbal noun forms formed from the same verb stem in various dialects in Modern Irish), as well as the development of the group of verbs where the verb stem and the verbal noun are identical would require further research.

4. Possible reasons for the spread of *-áil*

Ó Cuív mentions some possible reasons for the spread of –*áil*; among them the importance of adjectival forms derived from verbal nouns in –*áil* (1980*:* 125), the existence of the verbs *áilid* ('requests, entreats', vn. *ál, áil*) and *ar-áili* ('enjoins, urges an action'; vn. *eráil*) (*ibid.* 137-138), or the existence of the termination –*áil* derived from Latin –*ālis* (e.g. *achtáil* 'the active life'*, sechtmonáil* 'weekly order') (*ibid.* 138). Apart form again emphasising that further work would be necessary in order to be able to assess the importance of these factors,

I would like to point out that it would seem very tempting to state that in the case of the verbal nouns of the Old Irish verbs *daimid* and *ad-daim* (of which the latter is a compound verb from the root of *daimid*) a new verbal noun form was created because the Old Irish verbal nouns of these verbs ended in a vowel, and with the falling together of short vowels in unstressed syllables in Middle Irish the need for a distinctive verbal ending arose. This view may be supported by the fact that apart from the form in *–áil*, other alternative forms with consonantal endings developed in the case of the verb *daimid* (see above). In the case of *tesbaid* (earlier Old Iris tesbuith, Thurneysen, 1980: 507), the verbal noun of *do-esta*, the ending does not look like that of a typical verbal noun; rather, it strongly resembles the most common present indicative singular 3 ending of verbs in Old and Middle Irish. Thus the need for a more distincive ending may also have been justified here; although more evidence would be needed to support this view.

The above discussion seems to indicate that thoroughly investigating the complexities concerning the spread of the suffix *–áil* would shed more light on the intricate sytem of verbal noun formation patterns through the history of the Irish language.

Notes

[1] *-ál* was the ending in the nominative singular, and *–áil* (with palatalized *–l*) in the accusative and dative singular of feminine a-stem nouns to which verbal nouns ending in *–ál* belonged. In most cases in the later language the original accusative/dative singular forms replaced the original nominative ones, that is why we have the form *–áil* already from the 10th century on (see for example Breatnach, 1994: 243).

[2] Ó Cuív (1980: 132) notes examples of other verbal nouns in *–áil* from Middle Irish that do not, however, appear in *IGT* (*benáil* 'act of cutting', *facciáil* 'act of seeing', *furmiáil* 'laying prostrate, confining (to bed)', *imrascáil* 'wrestling'); however, I do not wish to discuss these here.

[3] The competition between various verbal noun forms is manifest in *IGT* as well – see e.g. *IGT* iii §3 *cloisdeacht, claisdeacht, cluinsin, claisdin, cloisdin* – 'act of hearing' – note that the most widespread form in Modern Irish is *cloisteáil*, which does not appear in *IGT* –; or *IGT* iii §95 *trasgradh, trasgairt* 'act of overthrowing, defeating' (Mod. Ir. *treascairt*).

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