Predication and the content of roots

Sylvia L.R. Schreiner

George Mason University

In some varieties of Scottish Gaelic, an invariant pronoun is found in a construction involving a span of time or distance and a prepositional phrase delineating the span. In other varieties, no such pronoun is present. I argue that the pronoun, when present, is in fact referential, rather than pleonastic. The pronoun refers to the span of time or distance established by the complement of *bho(n)* 'from/since'. The span noun in the first clause is able to form a predicate by merging with a null classifier that is semantically compatible with roots that have an interpretation in the context of [SPAN]. The construction without the pronoun, on the other hand, fits into existing analyses of predication in Gaelic. These data have important implications for our understanding of "expletive" pronouns, the interaction of root semantics with functional material, and for theories of nominal and classifier structure in general.

While Scottish Gaelic has sometimes been claimed not to have expletive pronouns (McCloskey 1996; cf. Adger 2011), an invariant pronoun appears in the following construction in some varieties (1). This appears to be similar to one type of nominal predication in the language, but does not employ the inflected preposition that is required in that construction.

(1) Tha   e/*i   bliadhna   bhon   a   bha   thu   an seo.
    be.PRS 3SM/3SF   year(FEM)   from/since COMP   be.PST you   here
    'It is (/has been) a year since you were here.'

Only nouns that are spans of time or distance such as *bliadhna* 'year', *mìos* 'month', *seachdainn* 'week', *latha* 'day', or *mìle* 'mile' appear in this construction, and a 'since' clause or 'from' prepositional phrase must be present. The open questions are: (A) What is the nature of the invariant pronoun? (B) What unites the group of nouns that participate in this construction, and how do they interact with the 'since'/'from' phrase? (C) Why is the verb *bi* involved, instead of copula *is*?

I propose the following: (A) The invariant pronoun is referential, pointing to the time span between the event time set up in the subordinate clause and the utterance time of the matrix clause, or to the distance span set up in the PP. Since this span is not represented overtly, the default (masculine singular) pronoun appears. The length of time or distance is being predicated of this span. (B) The roots that participate in this construction all contain a lexical (Encyclopedic) interpretation in the context of [SPAN]. (C) Following Roy's (2006/2013) division of the stage-individual distinction into *defining*, *characterizing*, and *situation-descriptive* sentences, this predication is *characterizing*, yielding a non-dense predicate. This type of nominal predicate is otherwise not found in the language. Roy's definition of a non-dense predicate is one that can hold without requiring evidence of the predicate to be true of all its sub-parts. This reading obtains in this construction.

I formalize this account within Distributed Morphology as follows: We start with a root that has an interpretation in the environment of [SPAN]. This is merged with a [SPAN] nominalizer (light noun, à la Kramer 2018's analysis of plurality in herd nouns). The resulting nominal cannot form a predicate, so merges with a [SPAN] classifier. The (phonologically null) VI that can be inserted here contains the [SPAN] nominal in its context for insertion. The projected ClassP then merges with Pred (instantiated by *tha*). The resulting PredP can then merge with the CP or PP to define the length of the span.

This analysis supports a modified version of Roy's proposal, and the view that Class can interact with nominal semantics. The data point to NumP and ClP being able to project separately (as in e.g. Roy and Gebhardt (2009), contra Picallo 2006, Alexiadiou et al. 2010) since it has been independently argued that NumP is not being projected when *bi* is involved (Roy 2006/2013, Schreiner 2015). This analysis also supports the idea that acategorial roots (e.g. Borer 2005) still have some semantic content.