

## **IRISH ENGLISH HABITUAL *DO BE* REVISITED**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the category of present habitual in Irish English, Irish and Scots Gaelic. The latter two are frequently claimed to have had an influence on the development of the tense and aspect systems of their respective contact varieties of English. It is argued that Scots Gaelic, in contrast to Irish Gaelic, has no separately marked habitual present system, and therefore there may have been less pressure to introduce distinct habitual-present aspect into Scottish English, an assessment which is in line with research in contact linguistics.

**Keywords:** *(Linguistic) Aspect, Present-Habitual, Language Contact, Irish-English, Irish Gaelic, Scots Gaelic*

### **1. Introduction**

It is well known that Irish English, like some traditional British English dialects, uses specific forms to denote habitual action in the present tense. In the north of the country, the marker in question tends to be inflected *be*, whereas *do + be* is used in southern dialects (cf. e.g. Filppula 1999 and Fiess 2003). While habitual marking by *do* has extended from the British Isles to various parts of the English-speaking world, habitual *be* is rarer (cf. Kortmann 2004). In addition to Ireland, it is used in Newfoundland (cf. Clark 2004), as well as in varieties of African American Vernacular English, South Eastern American Vernaculars, Gullah, Chicago English and Bahamian English (cf. e.g. Kortmann & Schneider 2004). Recently, Hickey (2006) has asserted that the mechanisms at work in the genesis of this phenomenon in Irish English are still ill-understood. Further, he points to the lack of the feature in Scottish varieties of English.

This paper proposes to re-examine examples of habitual marking in the English dialects of the Scotland and particularly Ireland. The approach adopted here is contact linguistic, as it is well known that in language contact situations aspect systems of the receiving language may be restructured (cf. Heine &

Kuteva 2005, Hickey 2006). The guiding research question in the present paper is whether the Celtic contact languages display differences that may add to the explanation of differences in their English contact varieties. The contact languages in question are the Gaelic languages Irish and Scots Gaelic, which separated physically in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, but used a common literary dialect till the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Gillies 2002:145). Welsh, on the other hand, belongs to the British Celtic language group, whose members were spoken in Britain until they were largely supplanted by Germanic languages. The Breton language is a member of this latter group as well.

## 2. The Present Tense Habitual Category in Hiberno-English

Various writers have described the system of marking habitual aspect in the present tense in Irish English. Most detailed are the accounts by Henry (1957), Bliss (1972 and 1979), by Harris (1984 and 1986), Kallen (1985 and 1989), Filppula (1999) and Hickey (2007).

In Standard English, the simple non-past verb form can signal a variety of temporal and aspectual functions, such as present state, habituality, future time and general truths (Harris 1986:175). Irish English, in common with Newfoundland and New World Black English varieties, however, also employs special aspect markers to code habitual aspect (Kortmann 2004). In Irish English this category is not homogenous but has a number of realizations. Hickey (2006) compares this feature in Irish English and South African Indian English. He argues that these two varieties have in common that their genesis took place in an environment of imperfect language learning by adult learners in a large scale language shift. This type of language acquisition is identified as being the cause of many characteristics of these varieties. Hickey gives examples of typical features of simplified registers and he argues that the importance of morphological marking of aspect systems, as indicated by the use of *do + be* or *bees* to mark habitual aspect in Irish English, can be connected to these. He does, however, caution that some problems in explaining the genesis of this feature remain.

Habitual marking is not restricted to one type. The approach chosen by Harris (1986) distinguishes three basic categories. The first is composed of finite *be* or *be's* and has a variant form in *do be* or *does be*. These constructions denote habituality.

1. Even when I *be* round there with friends I *be* scared. (Harris 1986:176)
2. He *does be* late for dinner sometimes. (Harris 1986:176)

In contrast to Standard English emphatic use of *do*, Irish English periphrastic habitual *do* is unstressed and may have a reduced vowel (e.g. Henry 1957:171; Harris 1984:306; Kallen 1989:6).

Considering the variation between *be*-structures, and those involving *do be*, most authors tend to attribute this to geographical factors. Bliss considers inflected *be* to be more common in Northern Ireland with *do be* being more general elsewhere (1984:143). While in Henry's Roscommon data both constructions appear, Kallen found no examples of inflected *be* in his Dublin corpus and considers *do be* to be the essential category (1985:134).

In addition to habitual *be*, Harris (1986:176) describes an 'iterative perfective' and an 'iterative imperfective' category, which are found with lexical verbs other than *be*. The 'iterative perfective' class consists of the *do*-marker denoting iterativity and an infinitive. This can be observed in the following examples.

3. He *does help* us. He *does plough* the field for us. (Harris 1986:176)

4. It *does stop* and it *does rain* on. (Henry 1957:173)

For the 'iterative imperfective' the infinitive is replaced by a present participle. These constructions denote recurring, durative actions.

5. They *be shooting* and *be fishing* out at the Forestry lakes. (Harris 1986:176)

6. We *be* often *wondering* where he gets the money. (Henry 1957:170)

The existence of a fourth category proposed by Henry (1957:170), a 'frequentative durative' consisting of *do be* + present participle, is contested by Harris. Harris considers examples like these to basically be instances of iterative *do be*, specified for durative contexts. In Kallen's corpus, instances of this *do be* + present participle construction were rare, appearing only once. He found no instances of *be* + present participle, and simple inflected *be*-examples are completely absent from his corpus. Stating that this category has been considered a salient feature of Irish English by earlier writers, Kallen therefore assumes that this construction may be on the decline (1985:145).

Investigating the differences between *do be* + participle and *be* + participle, Harris suggests that the *do be* + present participle-structure can in some cases be analysed as *do*-support of *be*-constructions, namely in questions or negatives. He gives the following examples to support this hypothesis:

7. What kind of jobs *do they be doing*? (Harris 1986:177)

8. Well, they *be planting* trees and they *be digging* drains and they *be sowing* manure. (Harris 1986:177)

In this case, *do*-support in the question seems likely. However, in view of the provenance of Kallen's and Harris's data from Dublin and Ulster respectively, it seems not unlikely that regional variation may account for some of the differences to Henry's Roscommon data in which both structures are found.

However, not only the distribution of habitual markings is comprehensively discussed, their evolution has also received much attention. The very different explanations previously given for the development of habitual aspect categories are conveniently summarized by Hickey (2007:221):

1. Bare verb and periphrastic *do* + verb found in English target varieties during language shift, *do* potentially with habitual interpretations (e.g. Filppula 1999, Harris 1986, Hickey 2007)
- 2a. Reanalysis of free variant periphrastic *do* + verb as habitual.
- 2b. Reanalysis of free variant periphrastic *do* under pressure from Irish.

Most writers agree that the structure *do* + verbal noun has a parallel in British English (cf. Henry 1957:171; Kallen 1985:139ff.; Harris 1986:188ff.). Still, the development of a habitual category in Irish English is largely attributed to a corresponding distinction in the Irish language, which differentiates between habitual and punctual. This distinction is grammaticalised for the substantive verb *bí*-, 'be', and this is illustrated by the following example:

- |     |                   |     |       |           |                   |
|-----|-------------------|-----|-------|-----------|-------------------|
| 9.  | Tá                | sí  | anseo | anois.    | (Harris 1986:178) |
|     | BE.actual pres.   | SHE | HERE  | NOW       |                   |
|     | She's here now.   |     |       |           |                   |
| 10. | Bíonn             | sí  | anseo | go minic. | (Harris 1986:178) |
|     | BE. habit.pres.   | SHE | HERE  | OFTEN     |                   |
|     | She's often here. |     |       |           |                   |

For verbs other than *BE*, the present tense generally has habitual meaning. Progressive aspect of an action, on the other hand, is denoted by a periphrastic construction.

The Modern Irish habitual form *bíonn* 'is' is derived from the earlier habitual form *bí(dh)* to which the present ending *-(e)ann* is added. In modernised spelling this yields *bíonn*.

Bliss (1972:76) further was of the opinion that, overall, the Irish habitual present tense was distributionally, and therefore functionally, identical with periphrastic *do* structures used in Irish English. He (op. cit., 77) points out himself, however, that his theory of the origin of the Irish English habitual marker *do be* is not without complications. Severe criticism of the approach is voiced by Harris (1986:178), who shows that the syntactic parallels between the

Irish dependent ending and Standard English periphrastic *do* are less complete than assumed by Bliss. To illustrate this point, Harris (1986:179) refers to Irish conjunctions, such as *mura*, ‘unless’, *dá*, ‘if’ and *go/gur*, ‘that’, which require a dependent verbal form ending in *-(e)ann* in earlier Irish, but the corresponding English constructions do not allow *do*-support.

Different authors point out that *do*-periphrasis has been used for various purposes throughout the history of the English language (e.g. Kallen 1985; Harris 1986). Some of these cases are *do*-support in negations from the 13th century onwards (Visser 1969:1530ff.) and *do*-support in questions from the 16th century onwards (Visser 1969:1544). It was also employed as a meaningless marker in the present tense. The first written instance of this use is found in the 12th century by Visser (1969:1498). Ihalainen argues that this feature was apparently in free variation with simple tense forms up to the 18th century:

“*Do* and *did* are very often used as the signs of the Present and First Past tenses in the Indicative Mood [...]: Present tense *I love* or *I do love*: *thou lovest*, *thou dost love* [...]. *Do* therefore, is the sign of the Present tense, though not always used.” (Ihalainen 1976 [repr. 1991]: 149; quoting from White, 1761, *The English Verb*.)

While Bliss (1972:80) considered the first examples of *do*-periphrases in Irish English to have appeared in a text dating from 1815, in later work (1979:293) he cites examples from a English text dating from 1705:

11. By my Fait, Deer Joy, I do let de Troopar ly wid my Wife in de bad, he *does ly* at de one side, and my self ly at de oder side, and my wife *do lye* in de middle side. (John Michelburne, *Ireland Preserved*, 1705, lines 23-26; from Bliss 1979:145)

Bliss classifies these examples as clearly habitual (1979:294). Yet the same text displays numerous examples of *do*-periphrases in the past tense.

12. By my Fait, Teigue Joy, the Micharr of a Trooparr, *did make* Force my Fadders House, and *did taake* de Fafteen fair white Egg, and de dainty fine Yellow Bacoan; he *did bate* my Wife, and *did trow* her down stairs, and *did call* her a Feisting, Farting, stinking Shaad. (Bliss 1979: 145)

If *do* support really were a calque on the Irish language present habitual, as argued by Bliss, these past tense forms should not appear in Hiberno-English.

Habitual *do* is not unparalleled in other dialects of English, and evidence of this is provided by Ihalainen’s data from East Somerset. Ihalainen argued that

periphrastic *do* is used in south-western British dialects to denote habitual aspect, but that it cannot be used to denote single, specific instances (Ihalainen 1991: 154). Like periphrastic *do* in Irish English, the auxiliary is unstressed in the Somerset dialect as well. While the actual, i.e. non-habitual form, is described to be realized as *I dig*, the habitual would be grammaticalized as *I do dig* (in transitive contexts) or *I do digëe* (in intransitive contexts).

While Ihalainen is more concerned with the realization of the habitual in the past tense, Harris (1986:187ff.) illustrates habitual *do* by the following examples:

13. She do be so strict with us gals. (Oxfordshire; Harris 1986:189)
14. The childer do be laffen at me. (Cornwall, Harris 1986:189)

Harris points out that most periphrastic *do* forms are confined to the expression of habitual contexts in the speech of older speakers, or are found in earlier descriptions, but the younger generation tends to use them in non-habitual contexts as well. The presence of this feature in south-western British English dialects leads Harris (1986:190) to assume that its usage by speakers of this dialect may have provided the model on which Irish English usage was built.

Hickey (2007:221-5) thematizes the emergence of the otherwise unparalleled *do + be + -ing* structures and particularly argues for influence from Irish here. He adduces structures like

15. Bíonn sé ag obair go crua  
BE.habit.pres. HE AT WORKING HARD  
'He works hard.' (Hickey 2007:222)

This includes habitual *be* plus a progressive construction. The above is a compilation of two aspects, progressive and habitual, as illustrated in the two examples:

16. Tá sé ag obair go crua nois.  
BE.actual pres. HE AT WORKING HARD NOW  
'He is working hard now'
17. Obríonn sé go crua.  
WORK.pres. HE HARD  
'He works hard (i.e. always).'

Hickey (2007:223) argues that the construction involving *be + -ing* was calqued on the basis of imperatives in Irish and he gives the following examples:

18. Ná bí ag déanamh imní  
 neg. BE.imperat AT DOING WORRY  
*faoi na leanáí*  
 ABOUT THE CHILDREN  
 ‘Don’t be worrying about the children’
19. Ná bí ag labhairt mar sin.  
 neg. BE.imperat. AT SPEAKING LIKE THIS  
 ‘Don’t talk like this’.

He holds this to be the point of entry for the expanded structures, and he bases his argument partly on prosodic grounds. However, there is no one to one correspondence of Irish to English, rather a two to two correspondence. *Ná bí ag* + verbal noun is not the standard imperative, but a marked, expanded form in Irish itself. The unmarked imperative form contains the negation *ná* plus the bare imperative verb:

20. Ná déan é sin  
 neg. DO.imperat. IT THIS.  
 ‘Don’t do this’.
21. Ná habair é!  
 neg. SPEAK THIS  
 ‘Don’t mention it.’

This presence of two possible structures, with one being more similar to Standard English, makes it less obvious that the expanded form must be used in Irish English when an imperative is used, though it may obviously have provided a model.

The original emergence of the habitual *be*-marker, has been explained in different manners. One school of thought sees its emergence in a retention of Old English features in Scots. Harris (1986) follows Traugott (1972:69) and argues that from Old English onwards a distinction held between *beo*- and *wes*-. While the former indicated predicative or habitual function, the latter denoted identity or eternal truths or was used in non-aspectual senses (Harris 1986:187). This Old English distinction is held to be the source of Modern Scots *be/be’s*. From there it seems to have been introduced to the northern Irish variety of Scots, Ulster Scots (Harris 1986:187, Filppula 1999:138).

Hickey (2007:227) on the other hand, does not concur with this opinion. He suggests that the Irish habitual may have provided pressure to introduce this category. Hickey finds several examples of inflected *be* in earlier Irish and British English texts, and identifies stative and generic meanings in those. He suggests that this usage may have spread to habitual marking in the north of Ireland (op. cit., 228-9). He also considers these early examples to be a possible source of habitual *be* in overseas varieties of English (op. cit., 230). Furthermore, Hickey found forms of habitual *be* not only in the north, but also in the south-east, both in earlier data in Co. Wexford, and some contemporary evidence in other south-eastern counties (op. cit., 231-2). If this can indeed be linked to earlier English dialects, the question arises whether contact with the now extinct dialect of Forth and Bargy, a barony in the South-East of Ireland which retained a Late Middle English dialect well into the early modern period, could have caused the retention of these features in the South- Eastern part of the country.

### 3. Scottish English

Hickey (2006) argues that overall there seems to be little influence of the retention of archaic features of the English language, except for in the lexicon. Instead, he considers simplification and the influence of Irish language structures to play a large role, the latter particularly in the genesis of Irish English syntax. Regarding the problems with the genesis of habitual *do* or *bees*, Hickey (op. cit., 252) draws attention to the fact that Hebridean English, in contrast to Irish English, lacks the feature of habitual marking by *do*, and also habitual *bees*, in spite of similar substrate influence. He infers that this might point to independence from Gaelic substrate influence.

In a substantial corpus study, Sabban (1982) found no parallels to Irish English habituals with *be* or *do be* in Hebridean English. Rather, she found that habituality can be expressed in two manners. On the one hand, she found expanded forms, i.e. forms marked with the ‘progressive’- marker *-ing* that are used for verbs which are highly resistant to being expanded in Standard English, such as verbs of perception or mental activities:

22. Well, drive slowly, it’s the only way when you’re not seeing well. (op. cit., 277)

23. No, they didn’t have English. They weren’t hearing a word of English here (op. cit., 278)

In addition to this, habituality is also expressed by a construction which is formally identical with a future construction. It consists of *will + be +*



expanded form, and Sabban asserts that it does not have any future reference in these cases:

24. [...] the nurse, [...] she'll be working down at Creagorry. (Sabban 1982:280)  
 25. But we'll be seeing them [i.e. tourists, PR] passing down this way going to the beach, all summer (Sabban 1982:281).

This distribution is surprising from the point of view of Irish Gaelic, but it does in fact resemble that of Scots Gaelic very closely. Even though the two Gaelic languages are closely related, they are not similar with respect to their aspect systems. In contrast to Irish, Scots Gaelic differs in its use of the present tense from the typically adduced Irish situation, and this observation was in fact already made by Bliss (1979). Irish differentiates between the synthetic present, used for habitual events, and analytic *be-* plus prepositional structures, which are used for actions in progress (cf. 15. – 17. above). The Scots Gaelic simple present is used for the habitual, iterative and for speculative (modal) futures (Calder 1972:233-5, MacAulay 1992:219):

26.    bithidh            Iain    tinn    a h-uile latha  
        BE.pres.fut    IAIN    ILL    EVERY DAY  
        'Iain is ill every day' (MacAulay 1992:219)
27.    bithidh Iain    tinn    am    màireach  
        BE.pres.fut.    IAIN    ILL    in    morning  
        'Iain will be ill tomorrow.' (ibid.)

In contrast to Irish, the synthetic present may be used for the habitual, and has also taken on the expression of futurity. As far as the use of the expanded form for the habitual in Hebridean English is concerned, Sabban (1982:288) observes that Scots Gaelic can use a periphrastic construction of the verb 'be', preposition 'at' and verbal noun for both the present progressive and for the habitual, as in

28.    Tha                                    e    a'    dol.  
        BE.actual pres.    HE    AT    WALKING  
        'He is walking/ he walks.' (Sabban, ibid.)

This situation seems to be paralleled in Hebridean English, which can use the same form for progressive and habitual contexts (cf. 22. and 23. above).

The situation Scots Gaelic does not reflect earlier usage found in Medieval Gaelic, where, as in Modern Irish, the present tense was used for habituality, and a separate future tense existed. The question must be asked, however, whether Scots Gaelic has exercised an influence on the system in Scottish English, or whether it could have been the other way round.

In an investigation by Meurman-Solin (1993), it was found that in the earliest variety of Middle Scots (1500-1570) there was little evidence of *do*-periphrasis in general, whereas the English spoken at the time already showed considerable use of periphrastic *do*. She shows clearly (op. cit., 238), that particularly those Middle Scots texts which display strong English influence have more overall *do*-periphrasis in the period from 1570-1640 than those which were not exposed to early Anglicization. And only after *do*-periphrasis was recessive in Early Modern English (1640-1700) does Middle Scots show numbers of *do*-periphrasis that are comparable to those found in the periods with high *do*-support in Early Modern English (ibid.). It seems safe to conclude that, if overall *do*-support was low in earlier Scots, it is not likely that this would have provided a model for habitual *do* marking in Scots Gaelic.

As for the emergence of the Scots Gaelic system, this system, though differing from Irish Gaelic, is similar to that found in earlier varieties in the British branch of Celtic. Middle Welsh had a synthetic present with primarily habitual and future uses (cf. Evans 1989:108-9), and this is indeed similar to the synthetic present in modern Scots Gaelic. This situation has changed during language development, and in Modern Welsh the uses of the synthetic present are mainly restricted to the future and to gnomic contexts. As the British Celtic ancestor language of Welsh was spoken in the north of England at least until the 7<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible that contact with British Celtic influenced the use of the habitual and progressive aspect in the Gaelic dialects of northern Britain by means of language contact.

*Do*-periphrasis is found both in Scots Gaelic (ScG) and in Welsh, but in both languages this periphrasis expresses preterite periphrasis, and its function is identical to that of the synthetic preterite:

29. Welsh:	Nes	i	fynd	allan	i	siopa
	DO.pret.1sg	I	GOING	OUT	TO	SHOP

‘I went out to shop’ ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/cymru/radiocymru/c2/storiau/dyddiadur\\_glyn.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/cymru/radiocymru/c2/storiau/dyddiadur_glyn.shtml). 2009-04-19)

30. ScG:            Rinn            mi            suidhe  
                          DO.pret            I            SITTING

‘I sat down’ (Gillies 2002:204)

This development is by no means recent. In Middle Welsh, preterite periphrasis was found already in texts of the twelfth century, here in the text *Culhuch and Olwen* (Bromwich & Evans 1992):

31.     Dyvot        a        oruc        Arthur hyt yn ty        Aber Celdyf  
           COMING part. DO.pret. PN        UNTIL HOUSE PN

‘Arthur came until the house of Aber Celdyf.’ (CO, l. 938)

From a substrate point of view, one might think that in the varieties of English spoken in these areas, *do*-periphrasis might be used for perfective periphrasis. And this, indeed, seems to be the case to a certain extent, at least in Welsh English:

32. John did see it last night. (Kortmann 2004:256)

For Scottish English, this possibility is also mentioned by Kortmann (2004:250). These co-occurrences obviously do not prove that we are dealing with cases where language contact exercises an influence on the respective aspect systems of the varieties, but the similarities are none the less interesting to note.

#### 4. Conclusion

It has been shown that the Irish Gaelic and Scots Gaelic manners of expressing habitual aspect differ fundamentally. Irish uses distinct periphrastic forms for the actual present, and a synthetic form for habitual presents. Scots Gaelic has expanded the original (habitual) present tense form to express both habitual and future senses. In Hebridian English this situation is paralleled by the use of the English future marker *will* to express habituality. Habitual *do* could not be found in Scots Gaelic, where a past tense form of ‘do’ is a preterite marker. It is conceivable that this situation caused the lack of habitual *do* marking in the English in Scotland.

The present paper therefore argues that the distribution of habitual marking in the English in Scotland and in Scots Gaelic, is not a counter-example

to the influence of Gaelic on the development of the habitual. On the contrary, it reinforces the argument for an impact of the Gaelic languages on the development of habitual categories in their contact varieties, as the differences in the aspect systems of the varieties of English seem to reflect those in the varieties of Irish and Scots Gaelic.

The feature of habitual aspect marking is not restricted to the dialects of English discussed above. Habitual aspect marking also is a feature of some New World English varieties and it has been noted by scholars working on these varieties that influence of some traditional English varieties may have led to grammaticalisation of habitual *do be* in the evolving contact-variety. It is hoped that the present description provides further insights into residual problems concerning the emergence of habitual aspect marking in these traditional varieties of English on the islands of Great Britain and Ireland.

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