Old English–Late British language contact and the English progressive: the linguistic evidence

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In this paper I argue that the suggested evidence that the Late British verbal noun construction may have influenced (what was to become) the English progressive cannot be trusted, given the very unstable nature of aspectual markers.

In the last couple of decades, a number of studies have been carried out on the nature of the verbal noun construction in various Celtic varieties, including older and more recent ones. The idea is that such studies may shed light on the relationship between the Late British verbal noun construction and the Old English progressive. On the basis of the evidence it has been claimed that the Late British verbal noun construction may have influenced the Old English construction which was to become the English progressive (Ó Corráin 1997; Mittendorf & Poppe 2000; Venneman 2001; Poppe 2002, 2003; Filppula 2003; Ronan 2003; Filppula, Klemola & Paulasto 2008). In my paper I argue that the relevant type of data cannot be used as evidence of such influence. The reason is that imperfective and progressive forms are by nature extremely unstable. There is by now a great deal of research on the development of progressive and imperfective constructions. It has been shown that such constructions typically develop along specific grammaticalization paths. The most typical development is apparently for locative constructions to develop into progressives, which may in turn develop into imperfectives, but there are also examples of imperfective constructions developing into progressives and of present progressives developing into simple presents, etc. (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca1994:82; Bertinetto, Ebert & de Groot 2000:540; Winford 2003:351; Killie 2008; Heine & Kuteva 2002:93–94). Consequently, we cannot safely assume that the Old Irish and Middle Welsh verbal noun constructions resemble the construction that would have been used by Britons in England following the Anglo-Saxon invasion. Neither can we assume that the construction used in medieval England must have resembled the one used in Middle Welsh. Furthermore, studies of aspect in contact have shown that what typically happens to aspectual forms in a language-contact situation is *not* that some aspectual function is transferred from one language to the other, but that an already existing function in one language is reinforced by a similar function in the other language. The relevant evidence and its implications will be surveyed in the present paper.

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