

# Clause-initial particles in a corpus of Contemporary Spoken Welsh

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# Aims of the talk

- Provide some new quantitative data on the use of the particles *fe* and *mi* in Spoken Welsh; and
- Ask whether these results could tell us something about learnability, the syntax of Welsh (and its future), or about syntax in general.
- Point of departure: Broad description of the properties of *mi/fe*; their role in linguistic work; earlier work; our results

# The particles

The particles *mi* and *fe* are used to introduce positive declarative main clauses (cf. Borsley et al 2007 for details)

***Mi*** oedden ni (y)n wneud hynna

prt be.1pl.imp pron.1pl prt do.nonfin that

'We were doing that.'

***Fe*** wnawn ni mynd

prt do.1pl.nonpast pron.1pl go.nonfin

'We shall go!'

# Optionality and mutation

*Mi* and *fe* are optional but they trigger soft mutation of the following verb form. This mutation may also appear when there is no visible particle.

**W**eles i ty Nathan ddoe

see.1s.past pron.1s house Nathan yesterday

'I saw Nathan's house yesterday.'

Soft mutation:

p>b, t>d, k>g, b>v, d>đ, g>\_, m>v, f>l, rh>r

Note: /g/ deletes; vowels, /n/ are unaffected

# Look ahead

“Modern Welsh is characterised by an almost complete elimination of pre-verbal particles...”

E. Anwyl (1899) *A Welsh Grammar for Schools*.

(Quoted in Jones & Thomas 1977)

# Background

- The particles have played important roles in work on the history of Welsh, comparative syntax, and syntactic theory.

# Willis 1998, 2007

- *Fe* developed out of a third person subject pronoun and came to be reanalysed, via an intermediate stage as an expletive pronoun, as a main clause complementizer.
- This change was a major contributor in the shift of Welsh from V2 to basic VSO order.

# Roberts 2004, 2005

- Welsh is VSO; Breton is V2.
- *Mi/fe* realise *Fin* (a head in the split CP) in Welsh.
- In Breton, *Fin* is realised by *a*.
- “The Breton construction differs from the Welsh one in that the presence of *fe/mi* in Welsh means that merger of these elements preempts movement in Welsh, while merger of *a* causes it in Breton” (2004: 312)

# “There are no verb-initial languages”

- Joutteau (2005, 2007) derives this generalisation from a generalised version of the Extended Projection Principle.
- Bury (2002, 2005) derives this generalisation from a particular approach to verb movement and a particular theory of phrase structure.
- Both Joutteau and Bury argue, in quite different ways, that Welsh conforms to the generalisation because of its particles.

- So, we can see that there appears to be quite a discrepancy between the status attributed to the particles by Anwyl 1899 and their role in contemporary theoretical work.

# Earlier work: Awbery 2004

- An analysis of recordings of informal conversation of eight speakers born in the 1890s

# Awbery 2004: Results

- *Particle + mutated verb form*

**Fe ddath** y cwlwm a phethe'n ddigon tshep

per come.3sg.past.sm the culm and things enough cheap

'The culm and so on became cheap enough.'

- *No particle + mutated verb form*

**Welodd** e galedi chwel

see.3sg.past.sm he hardship see.2pl.pres

'He saw hardship, you see.'

- *No particle + unmutated, mutable verb form*

**Dath** merchant wedyn I glasgu fe rownd ffor'hyn

come.3sg.past merchant then to collect it round way this

'A merchant came then to collect it round this way.'

# Awbery 2004: Results

- 400 clauses
- 47% “unmarked”
  - No particle
  - No mutation (including mutable verb forms)
- 53% “marked”
  - Particle (13% of the marked forms) or mutation or both
- Overall use of particles: 7%
  - No figures on unmutable verb forms
  - No figures on mutable, unmutated verb forms

What evidence does the learner have for the particles?

- Given their apparent role in determining major word order patterns, one may ask what evidence is required for children to acquire the particle *mi* and *fe*.
- To see what evidence can actually be found in natural discourse, we need slightly different categories.

# Our analysis

- Particle
- Mutated verb form
- Unmutatable verb form
- Unmutated, mutatable verb form

(The first two categories correspond to Awbery's 'marked', the third and fourth correspond to her 'unmarked' category.)

# Corpus

- Compiled for Margaret Deuchar's AHRC-funded project on code-switching and convergence in Welsh (now hosted by the ESRC Centre for Research on Bilingualism at Bangor)
- ca. 40 hours of natural conversation of about 30 minutes each

<http://talkbank.org/data/BilingBank/Bangor/www.talkbank>

<http://siarad.org.uk/>

# Unmutatable verb forms

- Verbs beginning with vowels or with /n/
- What about the auxiliary *gwneud* 'do'?

## *Gwneud* 'do' as unmutatable verb?

- ***Missing /g/ in unexpected places***

Mi oedden ni (y)n ***wneud*** hynna

prt be.1pl.imp pron.1pl prt do.nonfin that

'We were doing that.'

Mae (we)di ***wneud*** hynna (y)n bwrpasol sti

be.3s.pres prt.past do.nonfin that prt deliberate you\_know

'He's done that on purpose, you know.'

## *Gwneud* 'do' as unmutatable verb?

- ***Initial /g/ in unexpected places***

O'n (y)n cer(dd)ed lawr a gwnaeth “oh hi”.

be.1s.imp pron.1s prt walk.nonfin down and do.3s.past IM hi

'I was walking down and she said “Oh, hi!”'

# Results

- 354 verb-initial positive finite main clauses

	particle	mutated	un-mutable	Mutable, unmutated	total	
Main V	1	12	10	-	23	(6%)
Gwneud	2	-	58	-	60	(17%)
Bod	1	9	259	2	271	(77%)
total	4 (2%)	21 (6%)	327 (92%)	2 (1%)	354	

- So how strong is the evidence for preverbal particles?

# Some context

- English changed from V2 to SVO.
- Lightfoot (1997) argues that learners of English may have failed to acquire a verb-second grammar once the unambiguous evidence for a verb-second analysis fell below the crucial threshold of “about 30 percent of non-subject-Vf clauses.”

# Things to remember or ponder

- Unmutated mutable forms exist...
- ...but never after particles (so far)
- What is the underlying form of *gwneud*?
- Is the current VSO pattern of Welsh stable?
- How smart are learners?

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