

The Impersonal in Breton¹

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Abstract

Breton verbal syntax is simultaneously VSO and V-2, or more precisely [P = predicate syntagm] PSO/XPSO and [T = tense] T-2. “Bare” presentations begin with a predicate syntagm; “lead-in” presentations with a non-predicate constituent [X = S/O/ADV/CIRC, etc.], which may be either thematic or focused. In “bare” presentation, the negative tense particle *ne* is sufficient to fill the first position in order to satisfy the T-2 constraint. But in the affirmative, with simple verbs, a dummy auxiliary “do” arises; with auxiliary structures (copula, existential, compound tenses), there is AUX-PRED > PRED-AUX inversion

The **apersonal conjugation**, formally identical with the 3SG, marking tense, but not person or number, is used before expressed nominal subjects, and after initial subjects in the affirmative. The personal conjugation marking tense, person and number represents the inclusion of post-verbal subject pronouns; it is also used after initial subjects in the negative (subject agreement).

The **impersonal forms** in *-r* and *-d* constitute a seventh form in the personal conjugation, referring to some indeterminate human subject. In Breton these forms are fully active, may not be used with agentive phrases, and are best translated with French *on* / English *one*, even though there is no corresponding pronoun in Breton.

Impersonal constructions include the **existential**, **meteorological phenomena**, **indirect impersonal verbs** of the type “it pleases me”, and the **impersonal compound passive** *dañssed e^z vez* “es wird getanzt”. With none of these constructions is it possible to reformulate with an initial subject pronoun. A possible analysis is that what appear to be 3SG verb forms may actually be the independently required apersonal conjugation, with no person/number reference, and that these constructions are thus subjectless.

1. Functioning of the Breton verb²

If there ever was “un système où tout se tient”, it must be Breton, given the difficulty of examining any one aspect of the language

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without touching on a good deal of the rest. So before looking at the various phenomena which may be described as “impersonal” in Breton, it may be useful, in order not to bewilder non-initiates, to provide some basic information concerning the verbal system of the language.³

1.1 Tenses

Breton has the following six tenses: present, future, preterite, imperfect, “present” conditional (1, potential), and “past” conditional (2, hypothetical):

Regular verbs
(1, 2, 3 singular and plural, and the “impersonal” form)

present	future	preterite
-an -omp	-in -ffomp L -imp	-is/-jon -jomp
-ez -et L -it/-oc'h	-i -ffet L -ot/-oc'h	-jout -joc'h
- -ont	-o -ffont L -int	-as -jont
-er	-ffer (L -or)	-jod (MBr -at)

imperfect	conditional 1, potential	conditional 2, hypothetical
-enn -emp	-ffenn -ffemp	-jenn -jemp
-es -ec'h	-ffes -ffec'h	-jes -jec'h
-e -ent	-ffe -ffent	-je -jent
-ed	-ffed	-jed

The preterite is hardly used nowadays in spoken Breton, and is barely understood, apart from the 3SG. The difference between the two conditionals is more or less clear-cut, according to dialect. Some authorities insist that a sequence of tenses must be observed (present – conditional 1; past tenses – conditional 2). There is a clear tendency to use conditional 1 (potential) for simple tenses:

- (1) *mã⁺ welffenn anezañ e larffenn dezañ*
if I.would.see¹ him.O e I.would.say¹ to.him
If I saw him I would tell him.

and conditional 2 (hypothetical, historically a pluperfect) for perfect (compound) tenses:

- (2) *ma miche gweled anezañ e miche lared dezañ.*
if I.would.have² seen him.O e I.would.have² said to.him.
If I had seen him I would have told him.

The conditional tenses are also used where French requires a subjunctive. The relatively close correspondence between the Breton and English tenses will allow us to gloss the Breton tenses with simple English tenses (English past = Breton imperfect) rather than with more opaque abbreviations (¹ and ² are used to distinguish the two conditionals).

Alone among the Celtic languages, Breton has true “compound” or perfect tenses analogous to those of French or English. According to Hemon (1975, p. 245), they arose towards the beginning of the Middle Breton period (1250-1650); they are formed with the auxiliary “be” (copula) or “have” and the past participle. The choice between “be” and “have” is similar to French; however, “be” is used for changes of state such as “grow”, “cool down”, and for a handful of other verbs such as “last”, “cost”. For reflexive verbs, the choice between “be” and “have” depends on the dialect. There are also *experiential “double perfect”* tenses similar to those of southern French:

- (3) *bed e meus butuned beked daou[̄] bakad bemdež*
been e I.have smoked up.to two pack every.day
I used to smoke up to two packs a day.

Finally, there is a *progressive construction*,⁴ which is formed from the situative forms (where separate forms exist) of the verb “be” and the infinitive of the lexical verb, preceded by the progressive infinitival particle *o^z* (*e^z* in some areas, including central Treger), which triggers the “mixed” mutation (lenition/provection). The simple/progressive distinction is obligatory and closely resembles the distinction in English (especially late 18th-century English); however, rather than highlighting the “contingency” of a process, is as increasingly the case in English, the Breton progressive appears to lay stress on “control by the subject”.

1.2 The verb “be”

In the present and imperfect, the verb “be” has separate forms for the copula (auxiliary), the situative verb, and the existential auxiliary (separate form for the present only). There is also a special form in the present (for both the copula and the situative verb) which is used after a subject in the affirmative. Finally, there are separate habitual forms covering the situative, copula, and the existential in the present and the imperfect. There are no separate forms for these various functions in the other tenses, but the syntactic differences regarding the place of the subject (AUX PRED S; V S COMP) are preserved.

**Verb bezañ “be”, PP bed “been”:
Internal functional articulation in the present and imperfect**

	SIT	COP	EXIST			SIT	COP	EXIST
S __ PRES.AFF	<i>so</i>		AFF	NEG				
PRES	<i>EMAN^a</i>	<i>EO</i>	<i>so^b</i>	<i>eus</i>	IMPERF	<i>OA^c</i>		<i>OA</i>
PRES.HAB	<i>VEŽ</i>				IMPERF.HAB	<i>VIJE^d</i>		

lower case: single form

SMALL CAPS: full paradigm – 1, 2, 3 SG/PL; impersonal form

(a) 3SG/PL only in the E; (b) L *ez eus*; (c) NW *EDO, EVEDO*; (d) L *VEZE*

So and *eus* are unique, invariable forms; the other forms have person/number variants (*EMAN* has 3SG and 3PL only in the E of the Breton-speaking area, which is the historical situation; in the W, and in literary Breton, analogous forms exist for all persons). The imperfect situative forms *EDO* are current only in the NW (preferably on a base *EVEDO*); these forms are usual, but not obligatory, in literary Breton. The distribution of *EMAN* and *EO* obeys syntactic rather than semantic criteria in the Vannetais region (SE), and functions according to yet another, poorly understood, system in the central S region (see Hewitt 1988).

1.3 The verb “to have”

Among the Celtic languages, only Breton and Cornish have developed a verb “have”. It consists of what are historically proclitic oblique personal pronouns and the existential form (in the present; for the other tenses, the general form is used) of the verb “be”: *m-eus* [mihi-est, to.me-there.is] “I have”; however, it is no longer perceived as

[to.me–there.is], but rather as a simple, highly irregular verb. As it is derived from the verb “be”, it has separate habitual forms for the present and imperfect. In view of its unique origin, with its completely different morphology from all other verbs, it has no impersonal conjugation for use after a subject in the affirmative or before an expressed nominal subject (see section 2). However, the great mass of “central” dialects along the NE–SW axis have developed personal endings for the plural: *hon eus* [to.us there.is] (> *hon eus-omp*) > *neusomp*, or (> *hom eus* > *hom eus-omp*) > *meusomp* > *meump* “we have”. The verb “have” is used both as a lexical verb “to possess” and as an auxiliary “have” + PP. As a lexical verb “to possess”, given its origin (to.me–there.is) it is understandably reluctant to allow definite objects; the infinitive for this meaning is *kaoud* “find”. The infinitive for auxiliary “have” is *bezañ*, the same as for “be”. The past participle for both the lexical verb and the auxiliary is *bed* “been”, with the distinction being made by the choice of auxiliary:

- (4) ...*on bed*
...I.am been
...I have been
- (5) ...*meus bed*
...I.have been
...I have had

1.4 Word order and information structure: presentation types

Word order in Breton is often described as being “very free”. In reality, it is above all the choice of the initial constituent which is relatively free, with the order of the remaining constituents depending essentially on that choice. The Celtic languages provide classic examples of VSO typology, which it would appear useful to refine as either TSO or PSO, where T = a constituent bearing a tense-marker: V.T or AUX.T V or AUX.T N, and P = a verbal or nominal predicate phrase, including an auxiliary where applicable: V.T (INF R.A.T) / AUX.T PRED (PRED AUX.T); PRED = PP / ADJ / N. VSO order is fairly strict in Irish and Welsh (however, Jones & Thomas 1977 adopt an SVO (more specifically T S PRED O) analysis for Welsh). With regard to Breton,

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the question is controversial; some authors (Timm 1989) assume a basic VSO order, while others (Varin 1979) underscore the relative frequency of SVO. For reasons similar to those of Phillipaki-Warbuton 1985 for Modern Greek, it seems to me that with no particular context, the truly neutral order of Breton is nevertheless VSO, even though it may be the case that for contextual reasons, SVO is actually more frequent. Another reason for taking VSO as the basic order is that it is the required order in embedded clauses, at least historically and in literary Breton. However, since at least the 18th century, an alternative SVO order is possible in “real, factual” complement clauses such as “I think that John will come”, while only VSO is possible in “virtual, possible, intentional” complement clauses such as “I want John to come”. While it is condemned by purists, it is curious to note that this alternative SVO order is possible only in complement clauses where it is obligatory in formal Arabic (another VSO / SVO language),⁵ but impossible in those where it is not allowed in Arabic, contrary to what might be expected if that innovation were due solely to interference from French.⁶

We thus have a dichotomy between a “*bare*” *presentation*: PS(O...) (initial predicate phrase), in which there is no great articulation of the information load, and various “*lead-in*” *presentations*: XPS(O...), where X = S / O / OP / CIRC / ADV, etc. In these, the initial X may be either thematic (topical) or rhematic (focused, carrying a major sentence stress); in the latter case, the focusing of a further constituent (by another major sentence stress) is rare, although not prohibited, since it is perceived as a kind of information overload:

(6) **Information structure** XPS(O...):

THEME	FOCUS (normal)
FOCUS	THEME (initial focus)
FOCUS	FOCUS (information overload)

This is why it is rare (despite the misleading examples of Breton textbooks) to have an expressed nominal subject following a verb which is preceded by a focused initial object (focus indicated in bold); (7) with a focused initial object and a pronominal subject incorporated in the verb is normal, but the same sentence with an expressed nominal subject (8) is unusual (there is a certain amount of

dialect variation in this regard; the dialects of central Brittany are more open to this type of sentence):

- (7) *krampouzh a^zzebront*
pancakes *a* they.eat
They eat **pancakes**, it's **pancakes** they eat
- (8) *!krampouzh a^zzebr ar^vvugale*
pancakes *a* eat^o the children
the children eat **pancakes**

1.5 Predicate structures

Under this heading, we find two oppositions: on the one hand, between the *simple verb structure*, V.T (INF RA.T), and various *auxiliary structures*, AUX.T PRED (PRED AUX.T); and on the other hand, between the *simple verb structure* and the *double or periphrastic structures*.

The *auxiliary structures* include the *compound tenses* (see section 1.1), the *copula*, and the *existential* (see section 1.2). They all share the same normal syntax ...AUX PRED S (no subject in the case of the existential; the entity whose existence is predicated is analysed as being PRED and the existential operator *so* (AFF) / *eus* (NEG) as AUX; see section 4.1), and are all subject to AUX/PRED inversion (see section 1.6).

(9) *Auxiliary structures*:

AUX.T PRED (PRED AUX.T):	compound tenses
	compound passive
	copula
	existential

The *double or periphrastic structures* include the *progressive construction* (see section 1.1) and *constructions with an initial dynamic verb phrase (DVP) + “activity-do”*. These double structures link a grammatical (syntactic) verb (“be.SIT” in the case of the progressive; “activity-do” for the other constructions) to a lexical (semantic) dynamic VP, the only instance in which it seems useful to postulate a VP in Breton. Both types operate only with dynamic (non-stative) lexical verbs.

(10) **Double (periphrastic) structures:**

EMAN (“be.SIT”) *o* DVP: progressive
o DVP *EMAN* (“be.SIT”): progressive
 DVP *a OBER* “activity-do”: dynamic initial VP

**1.6 The T-2 constraint:
 tense-bearing element in second position**

Breton has a double heritage: on the one hand, it has inherited a VSO typology from insular Celtic; on the other hand it appears to have become associated, through the medium of Old French, with a continental V-2 *Sprachbund* (verb in second position; in Breton this applies only to matrix clauses) which appears to have spread out from a Germanic home. Given that the two formulas VSO and V-2 are *a priori* incompatible, one is tempted to reformulate them as PSO and T-2, for it is only by viewing them in this way that it is possible to explain how Breton manages to comply with both simultaneously! However, this compliance gives rise to two manipulations (not to say “transformations”) with respect to affirmative phrases in “bare” presentation (PSO).

In the case of the *simple verb structure* in “*bare*” *presentation*, the negative tense particle *ne* is sufficient to fill the first slot:

- (11) *ne*̄ *zebran ked a*̄ *krampouzh* [PSO]
ne I.eat not of pancakes
 I do not eat pancakes

In the various “*lead-in*” *presentations*, the predicate is already in second position:

- (12) *alies e*̄ *tebran krampouzh* [XPSO; X = ADV]
 often *e* I.eat pancakes
 often I eat pancakes
- (13) *krampouzh a*̄ *zebran* [XPS; X = O]
 pancakes *a* I.eat
 I eat **pancakes**

While the negative tense particle may fill the first slot, it may also, like the affirmative tense particles, come between a constituent in

initial position and a tense-bearing element in second position. In this sense, it is “ambivalent”:

- (14) *alies nēzebran ked* [XPS; X = ADV]
often *ne* I eat not
often I do not eat

However, in the affirmative in “bare” presentation, some mechanism is required to get the tense out of initial position, and this is where the “**dummy auxiliary**” RA “**do**” comes in. Thus with simple verb structures in “bare” presentation, the affirmative equivalent of the negative (15) is (16):

- (15) *nēzebran ked āgrampouzh* [PSO]
ne I.eat not of pancakes
I do not eat pancakes

- (16) *dibriñ a ran krampouzh* [PSO]
eat.INF *a* I.do pancakes
I eat pancakes

Similarly, with **auxiliary structures** (existential, copula, compound tenses), the normal order is ...AUX PRED S... Since it is the auxiliary which carries tense, the trick in order to satisfy the T-2 constraint in “bare” presentation in the affirmative consists in inverting the auxiliary and predicate:

**AUX PRED > PRED AUX inversion
in “bare” presentation in the affirmative**

“Bare” presentation PS		“Lead-in” presentation XPS
AFF: PRED AUX (S)	NEG: <i>ne</i> AUX <i>ked</i> PRED (S)	CIRC AUX PRED (S)
<i>krampouzh so</i> (L <i>ez eus</i>) pancakes be.EXIST.AFF° there are pancakes	<i>n'eus ked a⁻grampouzh</i> <i>ne</i> be.EXIST.NEG° not of pancakes there are no pancakes	<i>neuse so</i> (L <i>ez eus</i>) <i>krampouzh</i> so be.EXIST.AFF° pancakes so there are pancakes
<i>bras eo an ti</i> big is° the house the house is big	<i>n'eo ked bras an ti</i> <i>ne</i> is° not big the house the house is not big	<i>neuse e^h-eo bras an ti</i> so <i>e</i> is° big the house so the house is big
<i>aed eo Yann da⁻Gemper</i> gone is° Yann to Quimper Yann has gone to Quimper	<i>n'eo ked aed Yann da⁻Gemper</i> <i>ne</i> is° not gone Yann to Quimper Yann has not gone to Quimper	<i>neuse e^h-eo aed Yann da⁻Gemper</i> so <i>e</i> is° gone Yann to Quimper so Yann has gone to Quimper
<i>debred e meus krampouzh</i> eaten <i>e</i> l.have pancakes I have eaten pancakes	<i>ne meus ked debred a⁻grampouzh</i> <i>ne</i> l.have not eaten of pancakes I have not eaten any pancakes	<i>neuse e meus debred krampouzh</i> so <i>e</i> l.have eaten pancakes so I have eaten pancakes

The only (poorly understood) *exceptions to the prohibition of tense in initial position* are for the situative verb “be” and the verb “go”, particularly as used for the future of certainty or intention (cf. French *je vais faire*, English *I am going to do*; eastern dialects prefer a simple tense of “go”, western dialects the progressive). Thus in (17), (18), and (19), very exceptionally, a tensed verb begins an affirmative sentence:

- (17) *emañ Yann o^htibriñ krampouzh*
is.SIT° Yann *o* eat.INF pancakes
Yann is eating pancakes
- (18) *e^h-an da⁻zibriñ krampouzh* [eastern dialects]
e l.go to eat.INF pancakes
I am going to eat pancakes
- (19) *emon o^hvond da⁻zibriñ krampouzh* [western dialects]
l.am.SIT *o* go.INF to eat.INF pancakes
I am going to eat pancakes

In view of this exception, there is no need, in the case of the *double (periphrastic) structure* of the progressive, to get the grammatical

verb *emañ* “be.SIT” out of initial position in order to satisfy the T-2 constraint. But is it really the grammatical verb that is predicate? In our formula PSO, the symbol P stands for a syntagm which includes two quite different things, namely the lexical predicate (whether verb, noun, or adjective) and the tense-bearing element (whether full verb or auxiliary). The two are conflated in the case of a simple tensed verb **tebran* / *zebran* [l.eat], and adjacent in the auxiliary structures ...*meus debred* [I.have eaten] or *debred e meus* [eaten e I.have], but separate by definition in double (periphrastic) structures.

So is it the grammatical verb or the lexical verb which best corresponds to the notion of predicate for Breton-speakers? The somewhat disappointing and evasive answer is that it is both at one and the same time. On the one hand, from a pragmatic point of view (information structure), it is clearly (20) which is the most neutral (information content which is typical of “bare” presentation):

- (20) *emañ Yann o⁺tibriñ krampouzh*
is.SIT^o Yann o eat.INF pancakes
Yann is eating pancakes

On the other hand, Breton-speakers are so used to the AUX PRED > PRED AUX inversion in the affirmative in “bare” presentation that the affirmative equivalent of the negative (21) is in practice not only (22), but also (23), whose initial VP is obligatorily focused (because of the focus, this type of sentence is very rare with an expressed nominal subject).

- (21) *n'emañ ked o⁺tibriñ krampouzh*
ne he/she.is.SIT not o eat.INF pancakes
he/she is not eating pancakes
- (22) *emañ o⁺tibriñ krampouzh*
he/she.is.SIT^o o eat.INF pancakes
he/she is eating pancakes
- (23) *o⁺tibriñ krampouzh emañ*
o eat.INF pancakes he/she.is.SIT
he/she is **eating pancakes**, what he/she is doing is **eating
pancakes**

This practical equivalence is reinforced by the fact that situative forms of the verb “be” exist only for the present (and in the NW for

the imperfect) and that in the absence of a specifically situative form, speakers hesitate to begin a sentence with a tensed verb. What we have here is a classic instance of tension between form (non-situative, prohibited in initial position) and function (situative, allowed in initial position). This hesitation, which can readily be felt in the eastern dialects, where situative forms are lacking for the 1st and 2nd persons in the present, and for all persons in the imperfect, becomes even stronger in other tenses (future, conditional), where there are no situative forms anywhere.

Such an initial focused dynamic VP, linked to situative “be” for the progressive in (23), may also be found in conjunction with “activity-do” for simple tenses (25). This is a further **double (periphrastic) structure**, and must not be taken to be a mere variant of the “bare” presentation simple structure in (24):

(24) *dibriñ a ran krampouzh* [simple structure: infinitive + dummy auxiliary “do”]

eat.INF *a l.do* pancakes
I eat pancakes

(25) *dibriñ krampouzh a ran* [double structure: dynamic VP + syntactic verb “activity-do”]

eat.INF pancakes *a l.do*
I **eat pancakes**, what I do is **eat pancakes**

For one thing, the VP must be dynamic, as for the progressive. With a stative verb, only the simple structure is possible:

(26) *anvezoud a ran Yann* [simple structure: infinitive + dummy auxiliary “do”]

know.INF *a l.do* Yann
I know Yann

(27) **anvezoud Yann a ran* [double structure: ***stative VP** + “activity-do”]

know.INF Yann *a l.do*

Furthermore, in the compound tenses, the double-verb (periphrastic) structure equivalent of the simple-verb auxiliary structure (28) is not (29), but (30):

- (28) *debred e meus krampouzh* [simple-verb auxiliary structure: PP of lexical verb]
eaten e I.have pancakes
I have eaten pancakes
- (29) **debred krampouzh a meus*
eaten pancakes a I have
- (30) *dibriñ krampouzh a meus gwraed* [double-verb auxiliary structure, PP of “activity-do”]
eat.INF pancakes a I.have done
I have **eaten pancakes**, what I have done is **eat pancakes**

2. The apersonal conjugation: no subject-marking

In traditional terminology, Breton is described as having a “personal” conjugation, whose endings express both tense and person and number (T.PN), and an “impersonal”, or more properly, apersonal conjugation, which indicates tense, but contains no reference to the person or number of the subject. The default case is the apersonal conjugation (no subject agreement). The personal conjugation is used in two specific instances: (1) where there is a putative sequence V S.PRON (the personal conjugation thus represents the incorporation of a post-verbal subject pronoun into the tense ending), and (2) with SV order in the negative (subject agreement). A possible explanation for the dissymmetry, with SV order, between the absence of subject agreement in the affirmative and the presence thereof in the negative is suggested in Hewitt 1985.

Personal and apersonal conjugations (personal forms in bold)

	Affirmative	Negative
VS	<i>dibriñ a ra an̄dud</i> eat.INF a do° the people people eat	<i>nēzebr ked an̄dud</i> <i>ne</i> eat° not the people people do not eat
	<i>dibriñ a ran</i> eat.INF a l.do I eat	<i>nēzebran ked</i> <i>ne</i> l.eat not I do not eat
SV	<i>an̄dud āzebr</i> the people a eat° people eat	<i>an̄dud nēzebront ked</i> the people <i>ne</i> they.eat not people do not eat
	<i>me āzebr</i> I a eat° I eat	<i>me nēzebran ked</i> I <i>ne</i> l.eat not I do not eat
XVS	<i>neuse ētebr an̄dud</i> so e eat° the people so people eat	<i>neuse nēzebr ked an̄dud</i> so <i>ne</i> eat° not the people so people do not eat
	<i>neuse ētebran</i> so e l.eat so I eat	<i>neuse nēzebran ked</i> so <i>ne</i> l.eat not so I do not eat

The verb/auxiliary “have” (cf. above, section 1.3) has only a personal conjugation, which is understandable in view of the fact that historically, its person/number markers do not refer to a subject pronoun, but rather to an oblique (dative) participant (cf. Lazard 1994: 142). For all other verbs, the apersonal conjugation always corresponds to the 3SG form of the personal conjugation (both the copula and situative verb “be” has for the present with S V order in the affirmative a special form *so*; the normal apersonal conjugation form for the present is *eo*). Thus without any particular context, a sentence like (31) is perfectly ambiguous:

(31) *gweled a ra ar^oc'hizhier en^edeñvalijenn*

(a) see.INF *a* do^o the cats in.the dark
cats see in the dark

(b) see.INF *a* he/she.does the cats in.the dark
he/she sees the cats in the dark

Naturally, this ambiguity may be resolved by converting to S V order:

(32) *ar^oc'hizhier a^ewel en^edeñvalijenn*

the cats *a* see^o in.the dark
cats see in the dark

(33) *henezh/honnezh a^ewel ar^oc'hizhier en^edeñvalijenn*

that.one.M/that.one.F *a* see^o the cats in.the dark
he/she sees the cats in the dark

However, if *ar^oc'hizhier* in (32) is focused (initial subjects may be focused or thematic; fronted objects are always focused unless there is also a resumptive pronoun in the normal object position), the sentence may once again be ambiguous:

(34) *ar^oc'hizhier a^ewel en^edeñvalijenn*

(a) **the cats** *a* see^o in.the dark

cats see in the dark, it's **cats** that see in the dark

(b) **the cats** *a* he/she.sees in.the dark

it's **the cats** he/she sees in the dark

3. The impersonal forms in *-r* and *-d*: indeterminate subject

All the Celtic languages have “impersonal” verb forms in *-r* and *-d*. In English-language Celtic studies, the term “autonomous” is also used. These forms are said to be related to the “passive” conjugation of Latin (*-itur*), but there is only one form per tense (at least in the modern languages; Pierre-Yves Lambert (1998a: 304; 1998b: 843) gives 3SG and 3PL forms for Old Irish, Old Welsh, and Old Breton). Thus, they cannot perform the twin functions of the *majhūl* “unknown, passive” vowelling in Arabic: impersonal with an indeterminate human subject (36c), and personal with a passive subject < object (36a, b; 38):

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(35) *qatala* (Arabic)

(a) killed^o s

s killed

(b) he.killed

he killed

(36) *qutila* (Arabic)

(a) was.killed^o s

s was killed

(b) he.was.killed

he was killed

(c) was.killed^o

“it was killed”, there was killing, people were killed

(37) *qatalū* (Arabic)

they.killed

they killed

(38) *qutilū* (Arabic)

they.were.killed

they were killed

In Breton, (see the conjugation table for regular verbs in section 1.1), the forms in *-ed* are now moribund except in Leon (NW), which is precisely the region where the 2PL of the present is *-it* rather than *-et*. King provides a concise description of the force of these forms in Welsh:

“Although sometimes listed as ‘passives’, these two forms are properly referred to as autonomous or impersonal, since they are not strictly speaking passive in sense (note that they can be formed for all verbs, including intransitives like *come* and *go* that have no passive). They convey the idea of the general action of the verb without specifying who or what is doing it. English has no exact equivalent of these, and must resort to paraphrases with *one* if a close translation is sought: (non-past) **siaredir** *one speaks/will speak*; (past) **siaredwyd** *one spoke*. But in practice the English passives *is/will be ...-ed* and *was/has been ...-ed* are usually the closest natural equivalent: **Siaredir Cymraeg fan hyn** *Welsh (is) spoken here.*” (King 1993: 220)

It should be added that in Welsh, these forms are emphatically part of the literary register, and apart from a handful of set phrases, are rarely heard in spontaneous conversation.

In Breton, on the other hand, the impersonal forms for the present and future at least (the future impersonal form may also occasionally serve for the conditional) are very much alive and widely used. Rather than the passive, the closest equivalent is with French *on* (English *one*). Le Roux (1957: 273-4) gives several examples of impersonal forms in Middle Breton used in conjunction with explicit agents, but notes (p. 274) that “cet emploi déjà relativement rare en moyen-breton, et probablement surtout littéraire [probably an attempt to render French passives with an explicit agent], disparaît en breton moderne”. Welsh allows an impersonal form plus an agentive phrase:

- (39) *Pregethir Dydd Sul gan y Parch. Elwyn Davies* (Welsh)
one.will.preach/there.will.be.preaching Sunday with the Rev. Elwyn
Davies
Sunday sermon by the Rev. Elwyn Davies

Breton does not:

- (40) *Prezeg a raffer dissul*
Preach *a* one.will.do Sunday
One/somebody will preach on Sunday
- (41) **...gant an Tad Erwan Lagadeg*
...with the Father Erwan Lagadeg
...by Father Erwan Lagadeg

In order to express (39), Breton has to use the impersonal compound passive (see below, section 4.4):

- (42) *Prezeged e^zvo dissul gant an Tad Erwan Lagadeg*
Preached *e* will.be^o Sunday with the Father Erwan Lagadeg
Sunday sermon by Father Erwan Lagadeg

For Irish Gaelic, Russell gives:

- (43) *bristear an fhuinneog* (Irish, Russell 1995: 101)
one.breaks/is.broken the window
the window is broken/somebody breaks the window

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- (44) *bristear í* (Irish, Russell 1995: 101)
one.breaks/is.broken her.O
it is broken/somebody breaks it

In (44), *í* is an object pronoun rather than a subject pronoun (*sí*); the construction would therefore seem to be active. Russell also gives (45), with an agentive phrase; apart from the fact that the order is wrong, this would appear to be rather doubtful, and not to occur in spontaneous speech.⁷

- (45) *bristear í liom* (Irish, Russell 1995, p. 101; more likely *bristear liom í*)
one.breaks/is.broken her.O with.me
it is broken by me

It is in Welsh that these forms appear to be least active and most passive.⁸ As we have already seen, the presence of an agentive phrase poses no problem for Welsh. A further indication of passiveness is the following: in Welsh, indefinite objects (without any article) generally undergo soft mutation following (even at a distance) a tensed verb form:

- (46) *gwelaf[~] dŷ mawr acw* (Welsh)
I.see house big over.there
I see a big house over there

However, the fact that this does not happen following an impersonal form suggests that *tŷ* has the syntactic status of subject:

- (47) *gwelir tŷ mawr acw* (Welsh)
one.sees/is.seen house big over.there
one can see a big house over there, a big house can be seen over there

All the same, it may be that the reluctance to render these Welsh impersonal forms with English *one* may have more to do with the relatively low frequency of that indefinite pronoun in English, and that functional equivalence between the Breton impersonal forms and French *on* may be boosted by the extremely high currency of *on* in French. Whether we like it or not, the Celtic languages find themselves today in a state of symbiosis with their respective

“metropolitan” languages, which now provide an inescapable model of linguistic reference.

In any case, the impersonal forms are felt to be fully active in Breton, since a non-countable object takes the partitive *a* “of” in the negative, just as with personal forms; similarly, impersonal forms can take the same object pronouns derived historically from *a* “of” as the personal forms do:

<i>Personal forms</i>	<i>Impersonal form</i>
<i>dibriñ a ran krampouzh</i> eat.INF <i>a</i> I.do pancakes I eat pancakes	<i>dibriñ a rer krampouzh</i> eat.INF <i>a</i> one.does pancakes one eats pancakes
<i>nēzebran ked āgrampouzh</i> ne I.eat not of pancakes I do not eat pancakes	<i>nēzebrer ked āgrampouzh</i> ne one.eats not of pancakes one does not eat pancakes
<i>gweled a ran ahanout</i> see.INF <i>a</i> I.do you.O [of.you] I see you	<i>gweled a rer ahanout</i> see.INF <i>a</i> one.does you.O [of.you] one sees you
<i>nēwelan ked ahanout</i> ne I.see not you.O [of.you] I do not see you	<i>nēweler ked ahanout</i> ne one.sees not you.O [of.you] one does not see you

However, the Breton impersonal form differs from the French *on* in two ways. On the one hand, it does not usually replace the 1PL as in colloquial French:

- (48) *chez nous on mange beaucoup de crêpes*
 at us one eats much of pancakes
 at our place we eat a lot of pancakes

In Breton, the 1PL is usual:

- (49) *du-mañ ētebromp ur bern krampouzh*
 side-this *e* we.eat a heap pancakes
 at our place we eat a lot of pancakes

The impersonal form suggests difficulty in identifying or a reluctance to specify who eats the pancakes:

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- (50) *ˉdu-mañ e[#]tebrer ur bern krampouzh*
side-this e one.eats a heap pancakes
at our place one eats a lot of pancakes

At the most, the Breton impersonal form may be used for suggestions commonly expressed with *on* in French (*on y va?*):

- (51) *mond a raffer?*
go.INF a one.will.do?
shall we go?

But here, the 1PL is equally current:

- (52) *mond a raffomp?*
go.INF a we.will.do?
shall we go?

Secondly, and far more importantly, there is no pronoun corresponding to the impersonal form. So while a VSO order such as (53) may be converted into SVO (54), there is no possible SVO for (55):

- (53) *dibriñ a ran krampouzh*
eat.INF a I.do pancakes
I eat pancakes
- (54) *me a^ˉzebr krampouzh*
I a eat⁰ pancakes
I eat pancakes
- (55) *dibriñ a rer krampouzh*
eat.INF a one.does pancakes
One eats pancakes

There is a kind of indefinite pronoun *an nen*, derived from *an den* “the person”, which may be used with the apersonal conjugation / 3SG:

- (56) *dibriñ a ra an nen krampouzh pa nevez nawn*
eat.INF a do⁰ “the.man” pancakes when he.has.HAB hunger
one eats pancakes when one is hungry

However, it is more customary to use the impersonal form:

- (57) *dibriñ a rer krampouzh pa⁻vez nawn*
eat.INF a one.does pancakes when be(.EXIST).HAB hunger
one eats pancakes when one is hungry

Note that there can be no impersonal form for the verb “have”, given that all its forms consist of existential forms (where available) of the verb “be” plus proclitic oblique pronouns; since the impersonal form corresponds to no pronoun which might provide such an affix, Breton is forced to fall back on existential “be” (*there is*) in order to render *one has*.

4. Impersonal constructions: absence of subject

Breton is a pro-drop language; unlike English, French or German, it has no need of “dummy subjects” along the lines of *it*, *there*; *il*; *es*. Let us recall (section 2) that the apersonal conjugation coincides with the 3SG of the personal conjugation. Therefore, the only way of telling whether a form which looks like 3SG actually has a referent is by converting a PS string to SP, as in (53) and (54) above. For none of the following Breton examples is it possible to find a conversion with an initial subject pronoun. One is therefore led to conclude that we have an apersonal conjugation, and that there is no formal subject.

Impersonal constructions

il est difficile de dire it is difficult to say	<i>dâaes eo da lâred</i> difficult be ^o to say
il faut y aller it is necessary to go	<i>red eo mond</i> necessary be ^o go.INF
il y a des pancakes there are pancakes	<i>krampouzh so</i> pancakes be.EXIST.AFF ^o
il fait chaud it is hot	<i>tomm eo</i> hot be ^o
il me semble it seems to me	<i>kaoud a ra din</i> find.INF a do ^o to.me
es wird getanzt il est dansé, there is dancing, people are dancing	<i>dañssed e^z vez</i> danced e be.HAB ^o

4.1 The existential

In section 1.5, we described the existential as being an auxiliary structure in which the existential operator functions as an auxiliary, and the indefinite entity whose existence is predicated functions as predicate. In order to satisfy the T-2 constraint, this auxiliary structure undergoes AUX PRED > PRED AUX inversion in “bare” presentation in the affirmative:

(58) *n'eus ked a^z gram-pouzh*
ne be.EXIST.NEG^o not of pancakes
there are no pancakes

(59) *krampouzh so (L ez eus)*
pancakes be.EXIST.AFF^o
there are pancakes

Recall (section 2) that with SV order in the negative (but not the affirmative), there is subject-verb agreement (personal conjugation). Therefore, if the existential entity were subject, we would expect it in initial position to trigger agreement in the tense-bearing element, but that does not happen – the form *eus* in (60) is not 3PL; a further

indication that the existential entity is not subject is the use of the negative partitive (58).

- (60) *krampouzh n'eus ked!*
pancakes *ne* be.EXIST.NEG^o not
pancakes, there are none!

This is not to say that an indefinite entity, once its existence has been predicated by the existential construction, cannot then become the subject of a VP complement:

- (61) *tud so o^otibriñ krampouzh*
people be.EXIST.AFF^o *o* eat.INF pancakes
people are eating pancakes / there are people eating pancakes

The form *so* in (61) is analysed as being existential rather than the special subject-initial present apersonal conjugation of “be” on the grounds of what happens in the negative:

- (62) *n'eus ked a^odud o^otibriñ krampouzh*
ne be.EXIST.NEG^o not of people *o* eat.INF pancakes
people are not eating pancakes / there are no people eating
pancakes

Apart from the verb “be”, there are a number of “presentative” verbs which serve to introduce an indefinite entity, which may in turn become the subject of a VP complement:

- (63) *dond a ra touristed da^oweled an ilis*
come.INF *a* do^o tourists to see the church
tourists come to see the church

Again, the initially non-subject nature of the indefinite entity is suggested by the negative partitive:

- (64) *ne deu ked a^odouristed da^oweled an ilis*
ne come^o not of tourists to see the church
tourists do not come to see the church / no tourists come to see
the church

4.2 Meteorological phenomena

Meteorological phenomena pose a special problem with regard to actancy: while in pro-drop languages such as Breton it is not possible

to find a subject pronoun with which to present meteorological sentences in SPO order, one can nevertheless imagine the existence of a specific referent as subject:

(65) *braw eo (an amser)*
fine be^o (the weather)
it is fine / the weather is fine

(66) *c'hwezhañ a ra (an awel)*
blow.INF a do^o (the wind)
it's blowing / the wind is blowing

In (67), *glaw* is not subject, but rather object, as demonstrated by the negative partitive in (68):

(67) *glaw a ra*
rain a do^o
it's raining

(68) *ne ra ked a^oc'hlaw*
ne do^o not of rain
it's not raining

Many meteorological phenomena are rendered by nouns plus “do” (69), but there are also a number of meteorological denominative verbs, such as *rewiñ* “to frost (*rew*)” or *skornañ* “to freeze” (*skorn* “ice”).

(69) *erc'h a ra*
snow a do^o
it's snowing

4.3 Indirect impersonal verbs

Breton has a fair number of indirect impersonal verbal expressions using the prepositions *da* “to” or *gant* “with”:

(70) *kaoud a ra din*
find.INF a do^o to.me
I find, I think, it seems to me

(71) *ne^o gav ked din*
ne find^o not to.me
I don't find, I don't think, it doesn't seem to me

The pronoun representing the participant in question may be fronted as a topic in “lead-in” presentation (72), but that does not mean that it is the subject, as shown by the lack of agreement (73):

(72) *me āgav din*
 I find^o to.me
 I find, I think, it seems to me

(73) *me nēgav ked din*
 I ne find^o not to.me
 I don't find, I don't think, it doesn't seem to me

A typical example of an indirect impersonal construction from Jules Gros:

(74) *Me āvez̄ welloc'h ganin insultiñ an̄dud ewid mond d'ur pred eured: muioc'h āblijadur am-bez!*
 I a.be.HAB^o better with.me insult the people than go to'a meal wedding:
 more of pleasure I.have.HAB!
 I prefer insulting people to going to a wedding feast: it gives me greater pleasure! (Gros 3: 291)

**Typical indirect impersonal verbs
 (always involuntary phenomena, no control by patient)**

<i>kaoud a ra din</i>	find ^o to.me	I find, I think, it seems to me
<i>soñjal a ra din</i>	think ^o to.me	I think, it seems to me
<i>ffelloud a ra din</i>	want ^o to.me	I want
<i>digouezoud a ra din</i>	happen ^o to.me	I happen to..., it happens that I
<i>tomm eo din</i>	hot is ^o to.me	I am hot
<i>red eo din</i>	necessary is ^o to.me	I must, I have to
<i>mad eo din</i>	good is ^o to.me	I am willing, I am happy to
<i>gwelloc'h eo din/ganin</i>	better is ^o to.me /with.me	I'd rather, I prefer
<i>sevel a ra din/ganin</i>	rise ^o to.me /with.me	I get a hard-on
<i>tapoud a ra ganin</i>	pick.up ^o /grab.hold ^o with.me	I'm in luck

4.4 The impersonal compound passive

The impersonal compound passive is an auxiliary structure consisting of the auxiliary “be” (always habitual in the past and the imperfect) and the past participle:

(75) *dañssed e⁺ vež*
 danced *e* be.HAB^o
 “it is danced”, there is dancing, people dance

(76) *ne⁻ vež ked dañssed*
ne be.HAB^o not danced
 “it is not danced”, there isn’t dancing, people don’t dance

The following example was heard from someone who was horrified at a spate of murders in Paris:

(77) *dre amañ ne⁻ vež ked laz ’hed re c ’hwazh*
 by here *ne* be.HAB^o not killed too.much yet
 around here there’s not too much killing yet, they don’t kill too
 much yet
 hier herum wird noch nicht zu viel getötet

(77) is a real passive, unlike (78), an active using the impersonal form:

(78) *dre amañ ne laz ’her ked re c ’hwazh*
 by here *ne* one.kills not too.much yet
 around here one does not kill too much yet

The impersonal compound passive may be applied to fairly complex double (periphrastic) structures (see sections 1.5 and 1.6) whose dynamic VP includes an embedded clause:

(79) *diskar traeoù so mad en o sav c ’hwazh a⁻ vež gwraed*
 pull.down things be^o [post-subject AFF^o form] good in their standing yet *a*
 be.HAB^o done
 things that are still standing sound are pulled down, “they” pull
 down things that are still standing sound

The impersonal compound passive may take an indefinite object; note the negative partitive in (81):

- (80) *debred e^z vez krampouzh*
eaten *e* be.HAB^o pancakes
on mange des crêpes
pancakes are eaten
- (81) *ne^e vez ked debred a^e grampouzh*
ne be.HAB^o not eaten of pancakes
on ne mange pas de crêpes
pancakes are not eaten, no pancakes are eaten

One must not confuse the *impersonal* compound passive with the *personal* compound passive: a definite patient acts like a subject:

- (82) *debred e^z vez ar^oc 'hrampouzh*
eaten *e* be.HAB^o the pancakes
on mange les crêpes
the pancakes are eaten
- (83) *debred e^z vent*
eaten *a* they.be.HAB
on les mange
they are eaten

If the regular forms of “be” are used instead of the habitual forms, the effect is a perfect resultative (84); compare the difference in Dutch between (85) and (86):

- (84) *debred eo ar^oc 'hrampouzh*
eaten is^o the pancakes
on a mangé les crêpes, les crêpes sont mangées
the pancakes have been eaten
- (85) *de pannenkoeken worden gegeten* (Dutch)
the pancakes become eaten
the pancakes are eaten
- (86) *de pannenkoeken zijn gegeten* (Dutch)
the pancakes are eaten
the pancakes have been eaten

Nikolaz Davalan, a doctoral student in Breton, has drawn attention to an interesting example of interference from French among neo-Breton (French-mother-tongue) pupils in the all-Breton Diwan

schools and French-Breton bilingual schools in Brittany.⁹ The impersonal compound passive in (87) is so strongly identified with the active French construction using *on* that these children regularly add object pronouns (88), whereas the normal Breton would be the personal compound passive in (83):

(87) *debred e^z vez*
 eaten *a* be.HAB^o
 there is eating, people eat, “they” eat
 on mange

(88) **debred e^z vez anê*
 eaten *a* be.HAB^o them.O
 they are eaten
 on les mange

Finally, given that there is a personal compound passive (82), (83), it is only logical to be able to use the *impersonal* form in that construction, as in the following example describing the charms of a tropical country:

(89) *ma ne⁻ver ked debred gant ar ffubu, e^zver laz'hed gant
 an⁻dommder*
 if *ne* one.is not eaten with the mosquitoes, *e* one.is killed with the heat
 if you're not eaten alive by the mosquitoes, you're killed by the
 heat

5. Conclusion

We began by making a rapid presentation of the verbal system of Breton, which achieves the considerable feat of remaining faithful to its Celtic VSO heritage (which we reanalyse as [P = predicate syntagm] PSO), while at the same time obeying a northern European V-2 constraint (relayed through Old French, but largely residual in Modern French), which ought more properly to be renamed T-2, where T represents the tense-bearing element (verb or auxiliary). We distinguish three basic predicate structures: the *simple verb structure*, the *auxiliary structure*, and the *double or periphrastic structure* combining a dynamic non-tensed lexical VP and a tensed syntactic verb, either “situative-to be” or “activity-do”. The *auxiliary structure* comprises the *compound tenses* (AUX + PP), the *copula* (COP +

adjectival or nominal predicate), and the *existential* (existential operator + indefinite nominal predicate) because these constructions all have an identical syntax; I suspect that such a grouping might well be extended to many other languages, and that one should not automatically suppose that the copula and the existential operator have the same syntactic status as the lexical verb. We also distinguish between a “bare” *PSO presentation* and a “lead-in” *XP... presentation*, in which X may be any major constituent except the tensed predicate syntagm, X being either thematic or focused. In the “bare” presentation, the *T-2 constraint* has the effect of transforming the negative utterances *nēzebran ked* [*ne* I.eat not] “I do not eat” and *n’eo ked bras an ti* [*ne* be^o not big the house] “the house is not big” into the corresponding affirmative utterances *dibriñ a ran* [eat.INF a I.do] “I eat” (“dummy” auxiliary creation) and *bras eo an ti* [big be^o the house] “the house is big” (*AUX PRED > PRED AUX inversion*).

We then distinguished three different acceptations of the impersonal, first the impersonal, or rather apersonal *conjugation* (no subject-marking), then, within the personal conjugation (which shows subject-marking), the impersonal *form* (indeterminate, unspecified subject), and finally various impersonal *constructions* (no subject).

The *apersonal conjugation* involves a marking of tense, but not of person or number; there is thus a single form per tense, which is identical with the 3SG (the verb/auxiliary “have” has no apersonal conjugation, and the verb/auxiliary “be” has in the non-habitual present a special form *so* which is used after a preceding subject in the affirmative). This apersonal conjugation is used after any subject (nominal or pronominal) in the affirmative, and before all expressed nominal subjects. With a preverbal subject, it is the apersonal conjugation which is used in the affirmative: *me āzebr* [I a eat^o] “I eat”, but the personal conjugation in the negative: *me nēzebran ked* [I ne I.eat not] “I do not eat”. The personal conjugation appears to represent the inclusion in the tense-marking of a postverbal pronominal subject: *dibriñ a ra an̄dud* [eat.INF a do^o the people] “the people eat”, *dibriñ a reont* [eat.INF a they.do] “they eat”. Given that the single form of the apersonal conjugation is identical with the 3SG form, this may give rise to ambiguities wherever a nominal entity could equally well be subject or object of the verb in question.

The *impersonal forms* in *-er* and *-ed*, typical of the Celtic languages, constitute a seventh form in the personal conjugation

paradigm. They refer to a putative human subject whose identity one either does not wish to or is unable to specify. The meaning is thus very close to that of the French *on* “one”, the main difference being that there is no pronoun which corresponds to the impersonal or autonomous form, for which an SV presentation is thus excluded. While this construction is fully active in Breton, the cognate forms in Irish, and especially in Welsh, may also convey a passive sense for transitive verbs, as witnessed by the possibility of using them in conjunction with agentive phrases of the type “by X”, which may not be used with the impersonal form in Breton.

Impersonal constructions, which we see as having no subject, include the *existential* and related presentative verbs, *meteorological phenomena*, *indirect impersonal verbs* of the type “it pleases me to...”, and the *compound impersonal passive*, such as “!it is danced”, “il est dansé”, “es wird getanzt”. Given that Breton does not require a subject to be expressed (it has no “dummy” subjects on the lines of English *it*, *there*, French *il*, German *es*), and that the apersonal conjugation (absence of subject-marking) coincides with the 3SG of the personal conjugation, it is not always clear *a priori* how to interpret the verb forms used in these impersonal constructions. What is beyond doubt, however, is that a non-subject-marking analysis (the apersonal conjugation) is otherwise unavoidable for Breton. This being the case, I see no reason compelling reason to assume that the verb forms used in these impersonal constructions actually involve a 3SG. Furthermore, I think that Breton may well point to a similar analysis for impersonal constructions in other languages which do not require an explicit subject, even if a specifically non-actancial marking is not independently required for those languages.

Notes

1. Sincere thanks go to Nancy Stenson for providing a copy of her article (1989) and for extensive discussion by e-mail of the impersonal form in Irish, and to Elizabeth Pyatt for providing a copy of her unpublished paper (1995).
2. This section reflects a descriptive framework initially proposed in Hewitt 1988.

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3. The Breton examples reflect a normalized form of the Treger dialect (NE of the Breton-speaking area). I use my own “etymological” orthography, a further elaboration of the *etreannyezhel* “interdialectal” orthography created in 1974 and used in Favereau 1992 and 1997, but more effective than the latter in predicting dialect reflexes (see Hewitt 1987). The most common orthographies are first (at least 85 %) the *peurunvan* “completely unified” orthography, also known as the ZH orthography, launched in 1941 under Nazi auspices and often associated with a nationalist political stance; and a distant second, the *skolveurieg* “university” orthography, created in 1955 and promoted not very successfully by the French authorities in an attempt to divide and counter overtly nationalist aspirations. As a result of French educational policy, functional literacy in Breton among native speakers (the ability to write a simple personal letter) is well under 1 %.

The presence of initial consonant mutations is indicated by $\bar{ }$ for the “soft” mutation (lenition), ^\# for the “mixed” mutation (lenition / provection), and ^\circ for the “aspirate” mutation (spirantization + lenition); *d* does not normally lenite to *z* in Treger either in tensed verbs or in lenited adjectives (contrary to popular belief among language activists, it does so more regularly in other contexts, e.g. *da \bar{z} orn* “your hand”) – the *d* > *z* mutation is shown here in order to bring the examples into line with majority usage.

The tense particles *a $\bar{ }$* (direct affirmative, used after subjects, direct objects, and infinitives), *e ^\#* (indirect affirmative, used after other constituents, such as prepositional phrases, adverbials, and past participles), and *ne $\bar{ }$* (negative, more usually *na $\bar{ }$* in Treger; before vowels, *n’eo ked* would be better written for Treger as *na n-eo ked*), as well as the progressive infinitival particle *o ^\#* (*e ^\#*), are not usually pronounced at normal tempos; however, the mutations they trigger remain, regardless of whether the particle is heard or not. In the large group of “central” dialects (including Treger) lying along a NE-SW axis, the “indirect affirmative particle *e ^\#* is moribund, and is generally replaced (on the evidence of mutations) by the “direct” particle *a $\bar{ }$* . This is not reflected in this article in order to conform to standard literary usage, which is based on the highly divergent “peripheral” dialects of Leon (NW) and Gwened (SE). In central Treger, as in a number of other areas, the progressive particle, when heard, is *e ^\#* rather than *o ^\#* ; again, this is not reflected here.

4. For more details, see Hewitt 1986.

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5. More precisely V-initial / SVO. With verb-initial clauses in Arabic, there is a low, but significant proportion of VOS and other orders which violate VSO. The principle that accounts for the order of constituents in all Arabic verb-initial clauses, *including* VSO, appears to be pragmatic rather than syntactic: VGN (verb-given-new); see Hewitt (forthcoming).
 6. See Hewitt 1985: 228-33.
 7. The Irish situation seems particularly difficult to nail down precisely. The impersonal/autonomous form is found with agentives ("by someone") in modern official Irish, no doubt prompted by the passive English translation of the form: *Cuireadh an tuarascáil parlaiminte le chéile ag Astrid Thors MEP, ball de phobal na Sualainnise san Fhionlainn* [was.put the report parliament.GEN with companion [=together] at [=by] Astrid Thors MEP, member of people the Swedish.language.GEN in.the Finland] "The parliamentary report was put together by Astrid Thors MEP, member of the Swedish-speaking people in Finland" (Nolan 2001: 61). Nancy Stenson (1989 and personal communication) indicates that impersonal/autonomous forms do not normally occur with agentives in native-like Modern Irish, although agentives were possible in earlier periods (e.g. Keating), and there is sporadic evidence of agentives in certain modern dialects (Donegal: James McCloskey, personal communication to Stenson). John P. Henry (1906: 19-24) gives a number of examples of impersonals with human agent phrases, but notes (p. 19) that the "construction is quite obsolete in [Munster and South Connaught], but we have abundant examples of it in the *old literature*, and it is still a *living* form in the counties of Mayo, Sligo, Roscommon, Leitrim and the whole of Ulster, but only in the mouths of the *old* speakers. It is becoming more and more rare among the young generation". William Gillies (1993: 187) gives for Scottish Gaelic *rinneadh an t-òran le Iain* [was.done the song with John] "the song was made by John". There thus seems to be a split between Southern Irish (Munster and Conamara), which does not now allow agentives, and Northern Irish (Mayo and Donegal) and Scottish Gaelic, which do allow them (or did so until quite recently). Elizabeth Pyatt (1995) adduces syntactic evidence suggesting that the autonomous forms were truly passive in Old Irish, that by 11th-century Early Middle Irish, "the autonomous verbal form still has many passive characteristics, but there is a noticeable increase in the impersonal

usage.” (pp. 20-21), and that in Modern Irish, the construction is fully impersonal and active.

Micheál Ó Siadhail (1980: 163) has the following passage (impersonal forms shown in bold) about an accident involving a car following a lorry with a loose load: “*Thit an bairille anuas i mullach an chairr. D’imigh sí ó smacht. **Crochadh** den bhóthar í agus **buailleadh** faoin gcláí i. **Caitheadh** Tomás Mór amach i mullach a chinn. ... Tháinig tumálaí an leoraí slán as. Níor **gortaíodh** ar chor ar bith é.*” (The barrel fell down on top of the car. It [the car] got out of control. It **was lifted** off the road and **was flung** against the stone wall. Tomás Mór **was thrown** out head first. ... The lorry driver came out of it unscathed. He **wasn’t hurt** at all.) None of these impersonal forms imply human agency, and for that reason would be impossible in Breton; furthermore, the Breton preterite tense is moribund, and the ostensible preterite impersonal form *-jod* is completely unknown, except to *literatí*. It is interesting to note that with two exceptions, all of Henry’s examples, both historical and contemporary, of agentives involve the past tense impersonal *-adh*. There may be a connection between this and the fact that the examples in Ó Siadhail (1980) of impersonal forms in which human agency is not implied are also in the past tense: if human agency is not necessarily implied, even today, by the past tense form *-adh*, there may have been less reason, historically, not to allow agentive phrases to be used with that form.

8. For a stimulating discussion of the syntactic status of the impersonal forms in Welsh, see Fife (1992). Elizabeth Pyatt (1995: 26) agrees with James Fife that the construction is basically impersonal: “Based on the lack of agent phrases, the presence of intransitive autonomous verbs and the position of patient/theme NPs in auxiliary constructions, one can straightforwardly conclude that Middle Welsh autonomous verbs are active voice with pro_{arb} [indeterminate human] subjects and that patient/theme NPs are always surface direct objects. ... the situation did not remain so clear-cut in Literary Modern Welsh. In that language, it appears that the autonomous verb developed a secondary passive usage.” Alexander Falileyev (personal communication, and 2002) is of the view that, contrary to what appears to be the case in Old Irish, the Old Welsh forms were impersonal active rather than truly passive.

It would be desirable to trace the history of the usage of these cognate impersonal/autonomous forms in Irish and Scottish Gaelic,

Welsh and Breton. Elizabeth Pyatt made a good start with her 1995 draft, which was unfortunately never completed or published. The key questions to be asked for each language and period, and for each tense of the impersonal/autonomous form, are whether the patient has subject or object characteristics (case, agreement, position), whether or not human agency is implied by the form, and whether or not agentive (as distinct from instrumental) NPs are possible with it. Whatever the case at the various stages of Irish or Welsh, it is clear that the Modern (and probably Middle) Breton forms are fully active and impersonal, imply an indeterminate human subject, and do not allow human agent phrases.

9. Personal communication and Davalan 1997: 115.

Abbreviations and symbols

° (do°)	apersonal conjugation: marking of tense, but not person/number
*	incorrect, prohibited utterance
!	unusual, surprising utterance, but not completely prohibited
?	questionable utterance, of doubtful reliability
=	soft mutation (lenition)
≠	mixed mutation (lenition/provection)
°	spirant mutation (spirantization+lenition)
\bar{a}	direct affirmative tense particle (after subject, object, infinitive)
ADJ	adjective
ADV	adverb
AFF	affirmative
AUX	auxiliary
CIRC	circumstant
COMP	complement
COP	copula
DVP	dynamic verb phrase
DYN	dynamic
\bar{e}^{\neq}	indirect affirmative tense particle (after prepositional phrase; adverbial; past participle; normally replaced by \bar{a} in Treger and other central dialects)
EXIST	existential

F	feminine
GEN	genitive
HAB	habitual
IMPERF	imperfect
INF	infinitive
L	Léon (NW), literary
M	masculine
MBr	Middle Breton
N	noun
NE	north-east
<i>nē</i>	negative tense particle (<i>nā</i> in Treger)
NEG	negative
NW	north-west
O	object
<i>ō</i>	progressive infinitival particle (<i>ē</i> in central Treger and other areas)
OP	oblique participant, object of preposition
P	predicate syntagm: V.T / AUX.T PRED (PRED AUX.T)
PL	plural
PN	person and number
PP	past participle
PRED	predicate (verb, adjective, noun)
PRES	present
PRET	preterite
PRON	pronoun
<i>RA</i>	“auxiliary”-do
S	subject
SE	south-east
SG	singular
SIT	situative
SW	south-west
T	tense: V.T(.PN), AUX.T(.PN)
V	verb
X	any non-predicate initial element

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