

Omission of the substantivising particle in Old Irish



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OMISSION OF THE SUBSTANTIVISING PARTICLE IN OLD IRISH

[Professor David Greene (1915–81) had a special interest in the syntax and etymology of Irish numerals, and contributed a chapter on the Celtic languages to *Indo-European Numerals* (ed. Jadranka Gvozdanović, Mouton De Gruyter, Berlin / New York 1992; repr. 2011), 497–554. In the late 1970s he was in regular attendance at a seminar on the *Triads of Ireland* which I gave at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, and — prompted by discussion at the seminar — wrote the note published here. I came across it recently during the course of my preparation of an edition of this text, which I hope to complete within a few years. After discussion with my colleagues at the Institute, I felt that it would be appropriate to submit Professor Greene’s note to *Celtica*, even after such a long time-gap. No changes have been made to his text, apart from the expansion and updating of the references. *Fergus Kelly*].

THURNEYSSEN states that the numerals ‘1’ – ‘10’ when used substantively are preceded by the particle *a h-*, unless they are preceded by the article or another numeral, or are otherwise defined.¹ There are several objections to this formulation, one of which is the fact that it ignores Borgstrøm’s convincing arguments for the view that the form of the particle before *dáu* ‘two’ was *a-* rather than *a h-*.² More serious is the inclusion of *óen* ‘one’ in the series, and its utilisation in the only example of the omission of the particle when the numeral is otherwise defined: *oín di airchinchib Assiæ in sin* ‘that (was) one of the leaders of Asia’ (*Wb.* 7b11).³ The numeral *óen* is syntactically quite different from the series ‘2’ – ‘10’; when used adjectivally it forms a compound, and when used substantively it is fully declined, and it is only in the later language that it is preceded by *a h-*. Furthermore, ‘otherwise defined’ is very vague: is it suggested that a partitive adjectival phrase makes the head noun definite in the same way that a definite noun in the genitive would? That this is not the case is clearly shown by old examples, cf. *a dí diib* ‘two of them’,⁴ *a tri dib* ‘three of them’.⁵ Nor does a following relative clause cause omission of *a h-*: *a cethair for-thugatar in fírinni* ‘there are four things which obscure the truth’.⁶ For Old Irish in general we can omit ‘otherwise defined’ from the rule; when

¹ *GOI* 243 §386. See also Translators’ Notes no. 92 (p. 679).

² Carl Borgstrøm, ‘Scottish Gaelic as a source of information about the early history of Irish’, *SGS* 5 (1942) 35–44, at 42–4.

³ Whitley Stokes and John Strachan (eds and trans.), *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus: A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses, Scholia, Prose and Verse*, i (Cambridge 1901; repr. Dublin 1987) 541.20–21.

⁴ Vernam Hull (ed. and trans.), ‘*Apigitir Chrábaid: The Alphabet of Piety*’, *Celtica* 8 (1968) 44–89, at 60.28.

⁵ Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), *Hibernica Minora, being a Fragment of an Old-Irish Treatise on the Psalter* (Anecdota Oxoniensia, Oxford 1894) 28 §248.

⁶ Hull, ‘*Apigitir*’, 66.65.

the numerals ‘2’ – ‘10’ are used substantivally, they are preceded by the article, by another member of the same series, or by the substantivising particle.

It is usually assumed that these numerals cannot be used as substantives except under the conditions stated above. There are, however, some marginal cases which would seem to contradict this. We need not consider the case of *dáu a trian, a trí a lleth* ‘two is its third part, three is its half’, since the editors tell us that there may be something written before *dáu*.⁷ But the case of *is lour da preceptóir i naeclis no thríi* ‘enough are two teachers in a church or three’ (Wb. 13a9)⁸ is puzzling; the substantivising particle might have been dropped by the scribe, as in *a trí no [a] cethair* (CG 460)⁹, but the lenition seems to indicate that the particle was not intended and that the lenition was caused by *no¹⁰* ‘or’. Kuno Meyer made no comment on the large number of cases of substantival *trí* in his text of *The Triads of Ireland*¹⁰ nor, as far as I know, has any subsequent writer. We find *trí ná dlegat turbaidi* ‘three things that are not entitled to exemption’ (§156), as well as *trí as anso bís do accallaim* ‘three (people) who are most difficult to talk to’ (§232). Other examples are §§160, 161, 162, 170, 183, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 198, 221, 227, 228, 233, 242, 243, 245. In one case, *tri[ar] ná ditoing ná fortongar* (§159), Meyer emended to a personal substantive which, strange to say, does not occur as the first element anywhere in the text, although non-personal *tréide* is common. Even if we assume that the original Old Irish text has been corrupted and interpolated, the problem still remains of explaining how a form so totally at variance with the normal usage of the language at all periods came to be introduced and to be preserved in a large number of manuscripts and re-echoed in late glosses; cf. §211 *trí seithir sochlatad* ‘three sisters of good repute’, glossed *trí ‘ga mbíonn clú maith*. All these examples relate to *trí*, but this may be accidental. D. A. Binchy calls my attention to the heptasyllabic line *.uii. do cumalaib cainib* (for *secht di chainib cumalaib?*) at Egerton 88, fol. 1c,¹¹ where there is no way of inserting the substantivising particle without damage to the metre. It may be that these examples point to a comparatively late origin for the particle, but more investigation of archaic texts would be necessary before arriving at any conclusion.

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⁷Whitley Stokes and John Strachan (eds and trans.), *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus: A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses, Scholia, Prose and Verse*, ii (Cambridge 1903; repr. Dublin 1987) 31.27. For discussion of this gloss, see Bernhard Bauer, ‘New and corrected MS readings of the Old Irish glosses in the Vienna Bede’, *Ériu* 67 (2017), 29–48, at 32–3.

⁸*Thes.* i 581.11.

⁹D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Críth Gablach*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series XI (Dublin 1941, repr. 1979), 18.460 §32.

¹⁰Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), *The Triads of Ireland*, Todd Lecture Series XIII (Dublin 1906).

¹¹*CIH* iv, 1266.18.