

POSSESSIVE AGREEMENT IN INSULAR CELTIC

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ABSTRACT

Possessive agreement is a pattern of NP-internal agreement in which certain features of the possessor (usually person, number and/or gender) are marked twice within the NP: firstly, on the possessive marker itself (e. g. a possessive pronoun) and secondly, on another morpheme, which obligatorily agrees in those features with the possessive marker (Corbett 2006: 47). This type of agreement is not common in Indo-European languages, but it is in Uralic and several other language families in Eurasia (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2003). However, Goidelic and Brittonic have constructions falling under the above definition in which the pronominal possessor can be marked by two pronominal elements which have to agree in person, number and (in the third person singular) gender. In both languages, the first pronominal element is the proclitic possessive pronoun. In Old Irish, the second pronominal element referring to the possessor is traditionally called the “emphasizing particle, or *nota augens*” (Thurneysen 1946: 252–3, Griffith 2008), and it distinguishes the same categories as the possessive pronouns. The second pronominal element in Middle Welsh is identical to the stressed simple personal pronouns. This paper investigates the phenomenon of possessive agreement in Insular Celtic by examining the frequencies of possessive constructions with agreement in selected Old Irish and Middle Welsh texts, and seeking to establish the pragmatic functions of these constructions. Additionally, by looking at the earliest attestations of constructions with possessive agreement it will be shown that it is unlikely that they should be reconstructed in Proto-Insular Celtic (or even Proto-Celtic). Rather, it is argued that possessive agreement in Insular Celtic developed as an areal phenomenon which arose in situations of intensive language contact that occurred in Britain and Ireland during the Early Middle Ages (Matasović 2007).

Keywords: possessive agreement, emphasizing particles, Welsh, Irish, language contact.

1. Introduction¹

Possessive agreement is a pattern of NP-internal agreement in which certain features of the possessor (person, number and/or gender) are marked twice within the NP: firstly, on the possessive marker itself (e. g. a possessive pronoun) and secondly, on another morpheme, which obligatorily agrees in those features with the possessive marker (Corbett 2006: 47). Although this type of agreement is rather rare cross-linguistically, there is no principled reason why it should be differentiated from other types of agreement, e. g. person/number agreement in the clausal domain, or gender/number agreement in the NP domain. Hence, in this paper we will use the term “possessive agreement” to refer to a particular set of constructions in which the *controller*, normally the nominal or pronominal possessor, and the *target*, normally a pronominal item, obligatorily agree in a number of features, usually in person, number and/or gender.²

This type of agreement is not common in Indo-European languages, but we find it, e. g., in Uralic (Matasović 2018: 90-100). The example (1 a,b) shows possessive agreement in Hungarian:

- (1) a *Az* *én* *ház-am*
 ART 1SG house-1SG.POSS
 ‘My house’
- b *Az* *ember* *ház-a*
 ART man house-3SG.POSS
 ‘the man’s house’

In (1a), the personal pronoun *én* agrees in person and number with the possessive suffix *-am*, and in (1b) there is agreement in person and number between the noun *ember* and the possessive suffix *-a*. In Hungarian possessive agreement is optional, in the sense that possessive suffixes can be used without nominal or pronominal antecedents, which means that *a ház-am* ‘my house’ (without *én* ‘I’)³ is also grammatical. This is similar to clausal person/number agreement in Pro-drop languages, where the presence of overt pronouns in the clause is optional,

¹ I would like to thank Ante Petrović, Elliott Lash and an anonymous reviewer for useful comments on the first draft of this paper.

² We understand that in certain syntactic theories the constructions to which this paper is dedicated would not qualify as “agreement”; moreover, the question which element is the controller, and which is the target of agreement might also be debatable. However, since all terminological issues are essentially a matter of convention, we will continue to use the term “possessive agreement” in the sense defined above.

³ The definite article in Hungarian has the form *a* before consonants and *az* before vowels.

but person/number markers are still present on the verb. However, in some Uralic languages possessive agreement is obligatory, at least for pronominal possessors, e. g. in Tundra Nenets (Corbett 2006: 47). In European languages possessive agreement is generally rare,⁴ but it occurs in some sub-standard varieties of German, for example (2):

- (2) *Dem* *Vater* *sein* *Haus*
 ART.DAT.SG father.DAT.SG 3SG.M.POSS.NOM house.NOM.N
 ‘father’s house’

In (2), the possessive pronoun *sein* agrees in gender and number with the possessor (*Vater*). Similar constructions occur in other Germanic languages and dialects, e. g. in Norwegian. This paper will look at the phenomenon of possessive agreement in Insular Celtic. We will show that it occurs both in Old Irish and in Middle Welsh in syntactically similar constructions, but that it is unlikely that possessive agreement should be reconstructed in Proto-Insular Celtic (or even Proto-Celtic). This is because not all of the morphemes used as agreement markers in Goidelic and Brittonic are etymologically related, and lexical replacement of those morphemes is not likely. Rather, it will be argued that possessive agreement in Insular Celtic more probably developed as an areal phenomenon, similar to other features shared by both Goidelic and Brittonic due to intensive language contacts that occurred between them in Early Middle Ages (Matasović 2007).

2. Constructions with possessive agreement in insular Celtic

The use of possessive agreement constructions is not obligatory either in Old Irish or in Middle Welsh, and it is limited to pronominal possessors.⁵ However, there is a similar rule in both languages stating that, within a possessive NP, the pronominal possessor can be marked by two pronominal elements which have to agree in person, number and gender (in the third person singular). In both languages, the first pronominal element is the proclitic possessive pronoun, which distinguishes three persons, singular and plural, and (only in the 3rd person

⁴ For a general overview of possessive nominal constructions in the languages of Europe, see Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2003, especially 665-667 for the constructions similar to (2) in various Germanic idioms. Surprisingly, Koptjevskaja-Tamm does not discuss the type of possessive agreement constructions in Insular Celtic that this paper deals with.

⁵ See, however, Ó Gealbháin (1991: 137-139) and Roma (2009) for some examples of apparent possessive agreement with nominal possessors in Old Irish; in such constructions, a possessive pronoun, agreeing with the possessor, precedes the possessum which is, in turn, followed by the possessor in the genitive case, e. g. *trén-a thrag-id Óengusso* [through-3SG.POSS foot-ACC.SG Óengus.GEN] ‘through Óengus’ foot’. This construction is used only when the possessor is coreferential with a NP which has been mentioned in a previous sentence.

singular) gender.⁶ In Old Irish, the second pronominal element referring to the possessor is traditionally called the “emphasizing particle, or *notae augentes*” (Thurneysen 1946: 252-3, Griffith 2008, 2018),⁷ and it distinguishes the same categories as the possessive pronouns. The second pronominal element in the possessive NPs with agreement in Middle Welsh is, for most persons, identical to the simple personal pronouns, and it also distinguishes the same categories as the possessive pronouns.⁸ The patterns of possessive agreement are illustrated in (3) and (4) for Old Irish, and (5) and (6) for Middle Welsh:

(3) *do hires=so*
 2SG.POSS faith=2SG
 ‘your faith’ (Wb. 29d13)

(4) *mo hires=sa*
 1SG.POSS faith=1SG
 ‘my faith’ (Wb. 31a6)

(5) *yn erbyn y erchwys ef*
 PRT front 3SG.M.POSS pack 3SG.M
 ‘against his pack (of hounds)’ (PKM 1.11)

(6) *dy atteb di*
 2SG.POSS answer 2SG
 ‘your answer’ (PKM 9.30-31)

Examples (7) and (8) show that possessive agreement is not obligatory in Old Irish; in (7), besides the possessive pronoun *do* there is no 2nd person clitic (*-so/-siu*) as in (3), and similarly in (8) there is no 1st person clitic (*-sa/-se*) as in (4):

⁶ Old Irish has three genders (m., f. and n.), while Middle Welsh has two (m. and f.).

⁷ *Notae augentes* in Old Irish are clitics which follow the last element of the NP; their usage is not limited to possessive NPs: they can follow the inflected verbs and agree with its subject (or object, depending on which element is topical) and they can follow the inflected prepositions and agree with their pronominal complements (Thurneysen 1946: 252-3).

⁸ Like the *notae augentes* in Old Irish, the personal pronouns in Middle Welsh are also used as agreement markers after the inflected prepositions; also, just as the *notae augentes* in Old Irish, they are optionally used as subject markers after personal forms of verbs, but this is, of course, a consequence of their being personal pronouns. In such constructions *notae augentes* and their Middle Welsh equivalents may have argument status (Griffith 2011, 2015). The parallelism of these constructions with possessive agreement constructions will be discussed in the last section of this paper.

- (7) *do* *chenél*
 2SG.POSS nation.NOM.SG
 ‘thy nation’ (Wb. 6c7)
- (8) *mo* *chenél*
 1SG.POSS kindred.NOM.SG
 ‘my kindred’ (Wb. 5b19)

Possessive agreement in Old Irish also occurs with verbal nouns which take possessive pronouns for objects (9):

- (9) *Ni-fil* *nech* *and occ t-adrad=so*
 NEG-be no one there at 2SG.POSS-worship.VN=2SG
acht meisse *m-óinur*
 but me.EMPH 1SG.POSS-alone
 ‘There is no one therein a-worshipping Thee save me alone.’ (Wb. 31d13)

Examples (10) and (11) show that possessive agreement is not obligatory in Middle Welsh; in (10), the only pronominal item is the possessive proclitic *y* ‘his’; in (11), the only pronominal possessive marker is the possessive pronoun *dy*:

- (10) *y* *gyuoeth ac y* *wlat*
 3SG.M.POSS domain and 3SG.M.POSS land
 ‘to his domain and his land’ (PKM 8.4-5)
- (11) *dy* *blant*
 2SG.POSS children
 ‘your children’ (CO 44)

As in Old Irish, in Middle Welsh possessive agreement also occurs in constructions with verbal nouns which take possessive pronouns for objects:

- (12) *a da* *yw gennyf dy* *welet* *ti*
 and good is with.1SG 2SG.POSS see.VN 2SG
 ‘And I am glad to see you’ (PKM 9.21)

Besides the basic forms of personal pronouns, Middle Welsh also uses the so-called “conjunctive” personal pronouns in possessive agreement constructions:⁹

⁹ Similarly in PKM 30.6-7: *y Wern uab Matholwch, dy nei ditheu* [to Gwern son Matholwch 2SG.POSS nephew 2SG.] ‘to Gwern, son of Matholwch’ your (own) nephew’. On conjunctive

- (13) *BendigeitUran ae nyuer-oed ynteu ar tir*
 B. F. and.3SG.M.POSS troop-PL 3SG.CONJ on land
 ‘Bendigeid Frân and his troops on land’ (PKM 22.26-7)

Constructions with possessive agreement, parallel to the Middle Welsh ones, exist in the other Brittonic languages as well, cf. (14) from Middle Breton (Hemon 1984: 74)¹⁰ and (15) from Middle Cornish (Lewis 1990: 27):

- (14) *hon Roe ny*
 2PL.POSS king 2.PL
 ‘our (own) king’ (*L’ancien mystère de Saint Gwénolé*, Rennes 1935, 403)

- (15) *a-m enes vy*
 from-1SG.POSS soul 1SG
 ‘from my soul’ (*The Ancient Cornish Drama*, Oxford 1859, 1273)

In the remaining part of this paper we shall disregard Middle Breton and Middle Cornish and focus on the first attestations and uses of possessive agreement constructions in Old Irish and Middle Welsh, for which sources are more plentiful and philologically better researched. For later reference the following table compares the OIr. *notae augentes* and the MW personal pronouns used in possessive agreement constructions (*notae augentes* often have two forms in Old Irish depending on whether the final consonant of the host word is palatalized or not; in MW only the most common forms are adduced in the table):

Table 1. The pronominal forms used in possessive agreement constructions in OIr. and MW.

	OIr.	MW
1 sg.	<i>mo...-sa/-sea</i>	<i>vy...i</i>
2 sg.	<i>do...-so/-siu</i>	<i>dy...ti, di, dy</i>
3 sg. m	<i>a...-som/-sium</i>	<i>y...ef</i>
3 sg. f.	<i>a...-si</i>	<i>y...hi</i>
1 pl.	<i>ar...-ni</i>	<i>an/yn...ni</i>
2 pl.	<i>for/far...-si</i>	<i>ych/awch...chwi</i>
3 pl.	<i>a...-som/-sium</i>	<i>ew/yw...wy, wynt</i>

pronouns in Modern Welsh see Rottet 2011.

¹⁰ Middle Breton also has a similar construction with the preposition *da* ‘to’, which governs the agreeing person/gender/number marker, e. g. *va bloavezyou d-in* [1SG.POSS year.PL to-1SG] ‘my years’ (*Heuriou Brezonec ha Latin*, Saint-Brieuc, 1808, p. 632, Hemon 1984: 86); however, this construction might be just a calque on the Colloquial French construction of the type *mes années à moi* ‘my years’ and diachronically unconnected to the Insular Celtic possessive constructions with agreement.

3. First attestations of possessive agreement

In Welsh, the possessive construction without agreement is attested earlier for all possessive pronouns than the possessive construction with agreement. Thus, in Old Welsh (8th-11th centuries) only non-agreement is attested, while the first agreement constructions are found starting in Middle Welsh (12th-13th centuries).

For example, in the OW Juvencus Manuscript, we find only the non-agreement construction (Falileyev 2008: 105-109):

- (16) *mi a'm franc dam an-calaur*
 I and 1SG.POSS mercenary by 2SG.POSS cauldron
 'Me and my mercenary (sitting) by our cauldron' (Juv. B VI)
- (17) *mi-telu nit gur-maur*
 1SG.POSS-retinue is.not very-big
 'My retinue is not very big' (Juv. B VI)

On the other hand, for the second person plural pronoun *eich*, the first attestation of the construction with possessive agreement is only in the 15th century, in the Early Modern Welsh period:

- (18) *ych Mahumet chwi*
 2PL.POSS Mohammed 2.PL
 'your Mohammed' (FfBO 35)

The following table summarizes the attestations according to the data from GPC:¹¹

Table 2. The first attestations of MW possessive pronouns.

	without agreement	with agreement
<i>Fy</i>	9 th century	14 th century
<i>dy</i>	9 th century	13 th century
<i>Ei</i>	9 th century	12 th -13 th century
<i>ein</i>	9 th century	14 th century
<i>eich</i>	13 th century	15 th century
<i>eu</i>	12 th century	13 th century

¹¹ The list is only illustrative, as we cannot be certain that the earliest attestation of a particular usage is captured by the GPC. Moreover, the dating in that dictionary is based on the dates of manuscripts in which particular texts are preserved; some texts are probably older than the oldest manuscripts in which they are found (e. g. PKM, which can be dated to the late 12th century, but is preserved in the manuscripts from the 13th and 14th centuries).

In the Middle Welsh corpus we compiled (to be specified in Section 4), the possessive constructions without possessive agreement are considerably more common than those with it, indicating that possessive agreement is a pragmatically marked phenomenon. In the tale *Pwyll Pendeuic Dyfed* (“Pwyll, Lord of Dyfed”, in PKM) there are 154 instances of possessive constructions (with pronominal possessors) without agreement, and 44 instances with possessive agreement (28.6%). Constructions with agreement are particularly common in dialogues (32 out of 44 instances, or 73% of all instances of possessive agreement).¹²

In Irish, both possessive constructions – with and without agreement – are attested already in the Old Irish period. For example, we find them in the Würzburg Glosses (7th-8th centuries);¹³ example (19) lacks possessive agreement, but we see it in (20), where *-ni* agrees with the 2nd person plural possessive pronoun *ar*:

- (19) *is hé ar n-athir iar colinn*
 is he POSS.1PL father.NOM.SG by flesh.ACC.SG
 ‘he (Abraham) is our father according to the flesh’ (Wb. 2b23)
 (gl. *Abracham, patrem nostrum, secundum carnem*)

- (20) *biid ar cuit=ni occa*
 be.IMPV.3SG. 2PL.POSS part.NOM.SG=2PL at.3SG.N
 ‘let our part be in it’ (Wb. 24a20)
 (gl. *Verumtamen ad quod pervenimus ut idem sapiamus*)

Just like in Middle Welsh, in the Old Irish corpus constructions without possessive agreement are much more common than those with it, also suggesting that possessive agreement has some pragmatic function, i. e. that such constructions were pragmatically marked. In the Old Irish tale *Scéla Mucce Meic Da Thó* (SMMDT), there are 67 instances of possessive constructions (with pronominal possessors) without possessive agreement, and 7 instances (10.4%) with it.¹⁴

¹² Similarly, in the tale *Ludd ac Llefelys*, there are 74 nominal possessive constructions with pronominal possessors, only 10 of which have possessive agreement (5 in the narrative parts, and 5 in the much less common dialogues).

¹³ For the dating of Old Irish documents see, e. g., Bronner 2017.

¹⁴ It would appear that possessive NPs with agreement are much less common than those without it in other OIr. narrative texts as well. In the short and early saga *Echtrae Chonnlai* (EC, 7th-8th centuries) there is only one instance of possessive agreement, and 21 possessive NPs (with pronominal possessors) without it. In the slightly later *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (TBDD, 8th century?), there are 12 instances of possessive agreement, and more than a hundred possessive NPs (with pronominal possessors) without agreement.

No firm conclusion should be drawn from the fact that constructions with possessive agreement are attested earlier in Old Irish than in Middle Welsh, and that such constructions are unattested in Old Welsh. One should bear in mind that our knowledge of Old Welsh and the other Old Brittonic languages is incomplete (Schrijver 2011: 5), and the OW texts do not contain many passages in which possessive agreement constructions would be expected to be more common (such as dialogues). Therefore, the lack of attestations of possessive agreement constructions in OW may simply be due to chance. Since these constructions are attested in Middle Breton and Middle Cornish, as we saw in the preceding section, it is quite probable that they can be posited at least in Late Proto-Brittonic, immediately before its split into individual Brittonic languages.

In the next section, we will explore the pragmatic function of possessive agreement in Old Irish and Middle Welsh.

4. Functions of possessive agreement

We have seen above that the possessive constructions with possessive agreement are much less common in Old Irish and Middle Welsh than those without it. This implies that the constructions with possessive agreement were marked and had a specific function. However, the exact circumstances in which agreeing person/number/gender markers are used in possessive NPs are unclear in both Old Irish and Middle Welsh. Yet it appears to be chiefly governed by pragmatic, rather than semantic factors, since there is no detectable difference in meaning between constructions with possessive agreement and those without it.

In order to establish whether the rules for the use of possessive agreement in OIr. and MW are at least similar to some extent, we have examined the use of all of the occurrences of possessive pronouns in a corpus of Old Irish and Middle Welsh texts. For Old Irish, we examined the Würzburg Glosses (7th/8th centuries) and in the prose stories *Echtrae Chonnlai* (EC, 7th-8th centuries), “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel” (TBDD, 8th century), “The Cattle Raid of Fróech” (TBF, 8th century?) and “The Story of Macc Da Thó’s Pig” (SMMDT, 9th century). For Middle Welsh, we examined the story “Culhwch and Olwen” (CO, early 11th century) and the stories in “The Four Branches of the Mabinogi” (PKM,¹⁵ late 11th century).

We believe that possessive agreement has a pragmatic function in that it reveals elements of the information structure of the clause. This means that it is

¹⁵ The “Four Branches of the Mabinogi” (PKM) is a collection of four tales: *Pwyll pendeuc Dyued* (PPD) “Pwyll Lord of Dyved”, *Branwen Uerch Lyr* (BVL) “Branwen Daughter of Llŷr”, *Manawydan uab Llyr* (MVL) “Manawydan Son of Llŷr”, and *Math Uab Mathonwy* (MVM) “Math Son of Mathonwy”.

used to denote either topic or focus of the clause in which it occurs. The topic is the possible center of interest or matter of concern in the conversation, or the referent which is accessible in the discourse and contained in the pragmatic presupposition. The focus, on the other hand, is the part that is asserted in a declarative utterance or questioned in an interrogative utterance (Van Valin 2005: 69, Lambrecht 1994). The topic is not a necessary element of the information structure of an utterance, since nothing needs to be presupposed in a discourse or conversation (e. g. in the so-called presentative utterances), but a focus exists in all utterances, since all utterances assert, command, or question something. Foci are of several kinds with respect to their scope (Van Valin 2005: 68-73):

- A) Sentence focus occurs in sentences that have no topical subjects. They answer general questions in which nothing is presupposed, e. g. “What happened?” An answer to such a question in English would be “My *car* broke down”, with an added intonational emphasis on *car*.
- B) Predicate focus occurs in sentences in which the subject is the topic (the presupposed referent known to the speaker and the hearer), and the predicate is the comment about that topic. Sentences with predicate focus answer to specific questions in which the existence of the topic is presupposed, e. g. “What happened to your car?”, to which the answer might be “My car broke down” (or just “It broke down”).
- C) Narrow focus is the focus type in which the focus domain is a single constituent, which may be subject, object, an oblique argument, or the verb. It can be completive, if it answers to a yes-no or Wh-questions (e. g. “Did your motorcycle break down?” “No, *my car* broke down.”), or contrastive, if it involves an explicit choice among the presupposed alternatives, e. g. “Was it your motorcycle or your car that broke down?”, to which one may answer “It was *my car* that broke down” (not my motorcycle).

Now, it seems probable that constructions with possessive agreement in Old Irish and Middle Welsh were used to mark narrow focus, certainly contrastive and probably also completive focus. This means that possessive agreement is likely to occur when some element in the possessive NP marked by it is focal, i. e. when it is asserted rather than presupposed.

How do we show which referent is focal, and which is topical, independently from the fact that it occurs in a possessive agreement construction? Doing pragmatics is difficult in a dead language, but we can still apply a number of tests for focality:

- a) a referent identified by a *nota aogens* (viz. its equivalent in MW) is focal if there is a different referent denoted by a pronominal element in the same, or an adjoining clause (this is, then, contrastive focus);
- b) an element identified by a *nota aogens* (or its equivalent in MW) is focal if it is clefted as the head of a relative clause preceded by a copula.¹⁶
- c) in dialogues, NPs expressing answers to content questions will be focal.

In principle, the element denoted by a *nota aogens* (or its Welsh equivalent) can be: a) the whole possessive NP (including the possessor and the possessed), b) the possessed NP, or c) the possessor NP. It is easiest to assume that the focalized element in possessive NPs (PNPs) with agreement will be the possessor, i. e. the pronominal element the *notae aogentes* in Old Irish and the personal pronouns in Middle Welsh are coreferent with. Many instances of possessor agreement constructions are compatible with this interpretation:

- (21) *Is derb lim=sa mo fáilte=se bid*
 COP.3SG.PRES sure with.1SG=1SG 1SG.POSS joy=1SG COP.3SG.FUT
fáilte dúib=si
 joy to.2PL=2PL
 ‘I am sure my joy will be your joy.’ (Wb. 14d11)

In (21) the possessive NP *mo fáilte-se* is contrasted with *fáilte dúib=si* ‘your joy’, lit. ‘joy to you’. An example of such a construction from MW is (22):

- (22) *a dygyuor mawr a vu yn y llys y nos honno*
 and multitude great REL be.3SG.PRET in ART court ART night that.F
yrwng y niuroed ef a niuroed y llyss
 between 3SG.M.POSS host 3SG and host ART court
 ‘and there was a great multitude in the court that night between his host
 and the host of the court’ (PKM 22.18f.)

Similarly, in the following example, there is possessive agreement, since the 2nd person singular possessor in the possessive NP is contrasted with the first person personal pronoun (*miui* ‘I’, a “reduplicated pronoun”):

¹⁶ On cleft constructions in Old Irish see DiGirolamo (2018), Lash (2020: 34-35) and Lash (In press, especially § 0.3.3).

- (23) *a miui a af yth le di*
 and I REL go.PRES.3SG in.2SG.POSS place 2SG
 ‘and I will go in your place’ (PKM 3.9)

A similar example from OIr. is (24):

- (24) *rofetar=sa is foirbthe do hires=so*
 know.1SG.PRES=1SG COP.3SG.PRES perfect 2SG.POSS faith=2SG
 ‘I know that your faith is perfect’ (Wb. 29d13)

In (24) the second person singular of the possessor in the possessive NP (*do hires=so* ‘your faith’) is contrasted with the 1st person singular of the subject of the main clause (*rofetar=sa* ‘I know’).

Where there is absolutely no contrast (and no other indicators that the possessive NP is focal), there is usually no agreement, as in (25):

- (25) *bad foirbthe far n-iress*
 COP.IMP.3SG perfect 2PL.POSS faith
 ‘Let your faith be perfect!’ (Wb. 27a24)

Here **far n-iress=si* may be possible, but it is not expected.

Let us now turn to completive focus, which may be marked by clefting the focal NP. There are several examples in Old Irish and Middle Welsh where clefted possessive NPs show possessive agreement. Here are some examples:

- (26) *ni to bar tatháir=si act*
 NEG.COP.3SG.PRES to 2PL.POSS reprimanding=2PL but
is do bar tinchos
 COP.3SG.PRES to 2PL.POSS instruction
 ‘It is not to reprimand you, but to instruct you’ (Wb. 16a24)

In (26), the first clefted constituent is focal, hence it is marked by possessive agreement.

In Middle Welsh, there seem to be fewer clefted possessive NPs with possessive agreement, but we do find this example in CO (where possessive agreement is much rarer, on the whole, than in PKM); in (27) the giant Ysbaddaden says of Arthur:¹⁷

¹⁷ However, even in CO there is no absolute rule that clefted possessive NPs must have agreement, especially if they are governed by a preposition, cf. CO 151: *bythawd o’th law pan y dechreuwyf* [be.3SG.PRES from-2SG.POSS hand that PRED begin.1SG.PRES] ‘It shall be at your hand that I will begin’.

- (27) *dan uy llaw i y mae ef*
 under 1SG.POSS hand 1SG PRED be.3SG.PRES 3SG.M
 ‘He is under my hand’ (= ‘It is in my power he is’) (CO 733)

Furthermore, if a possessive NP is an answer to a question, it is fronted and focal, and it is usually marked by possessive agreement:

- (28) *Pwy yw y llygod-en? – Vyg gwreic i*
 who be.3SG.PRES ART mouse-SG 1SG.POSS wife 1SG
yw hi
 be.3SG.PRES 3SG.F
 ‘Who is the mouse? – It is my wife’ (PKM 46. 34)

Up to now, we have assumed that the focal element in the possessive NP with possessive agreement is the possessor. Note, however, that there are passages, especially in narrative texts, in which it appears that the focal element of the possessive NP with agreement is not the possessor (which agrees with the *nota augens*), but rather the possessum. Take, for example, the following example from the tale “The Tale of Mac Da Thó’s Pig” (SMMDT). It follows a passage in which one of the characters, Cet, humiliates his enemies by telling stories that put shame on them; so, when talking about one of his opponents, Óengus, he says:

- (29) *Cid dia-tá Lám Gábuid for a*
 what from.REL-BE.3SG.PRES L G on.3SG.M.POS
athair=sium? ol Cet.
 father=3SG.M said C.
 ‘“Why is his father called Lám Gábuid?” said Cet.’ (SMMDT 10).

In (29) *athair* ‘father’ is focal, because in the preceding paragraph he wasn’t mentioned, only his son, Óengus, was referred to. The focus is clearly not on the possessor *a* ‘his’ (referring to Óengus), because there is no other possible referent in the preceding passage, so the possessive pronoun must refer to the topic. Thus, it appears that in some instances the use of possessive agreement markers indicates that *something* in the possessive NP is focal, not necessarily the possessor they agree with.

As in Old Irish, there are examples in Middle Welsh where possessive agreement seems to be used not to mark the possessor as the focal element, but rather the possessed, or the whole possessive NP. In a passage from “Branwen, daughter of Llyr” (*Branwen, merch Lyr*), the Irish pig herders see a curious host approaching the coasts of Ireland from across the sea. They say this to Matholwch, the Irish king, and he tells them to go and ask Branwen, his Welsh

wife, what it is that they saw. They do it, and when they ask “What is the mountain that can be seen besides the ships?” (PKM 29.16), she answers:

- (30) *Bendigeit Uran, vy mrawt i, heb hi,*
 B. B. 1SG.POSS brother 1SG said she
Oed hwnnw yn dyuot y ueis
 be.3SG.PRET that PRED come.VN across
 ‘ “It was Brân the Blessed, my brother,” said she, “coming across” (PKM 29.17-18)

In (30) it is clear that *Bendigeit Uran*, “Brân the Blessed”, is the narrow focus of the sentence, since it is the direct answer to the question asked in the preceding sentence. Hence the possessor, (1st person singular) cannot be focal in *vy mrawt i* “my brother”; rather, the possessed element (*brawd* “brother”), or the whole possessive NP (*vy mrawt i*) is focal, and this is indicated by possessive agreement.

However, it is important to note that there are no sufficient and necessary conditions for the use of possessive agreement. Sometimes it is used when there is no reason to consider it as marking focal elements, e. g. in the following example:

- (31) *i. far samail=si fri talmain*
 i. e. 2PL.POSS like=2PL to earth.ACC.SG
 ‘i. e. your likening to earth’ (Wb. 33d4)

In this example there are no other pronominal elements that could be used for contrastive focus, and the PNP with possessive agreement is not focalized by a clefted relative clause, so there are no independent reasons for considering it as focal. We can only guess why the glossator chose to add the *nota augens* to the possessive NP in this particular instance.¹⁸

Likewise, it is difficult to maintain that the possessive NP possessive agreement is always used to mark the focus in MW. In one passage from

¹⁸ We might speculate that the Latin text of St. Paul’s Epistle to which the glossator is referring may provide some clue as to why possessive agreement is used in the gloss. *Heb. 6.9* runs: *Confidimus autem de vobis dilectissimi meliora et viciniore salutis: tametsi ita loquimur*. Latin *ita loquimur* ‘we speak thus’ refers to the preceding passage (*Heb. 6. 7-8*) where St. Paul says: *Terra enim saepe venientem super se bibens imbrem, et generans herbam opportunam illis, a quibus colitur: accipit benedictionem a Deo. Proferens autem spinas ac tribulos, reproba est, et maledicto proxima: cujus consummatio in combustionem*. “For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God, but land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed: it will be burned”, so the glossator comments that Paul is metaphorically comparing his flock to the earth that receives blessing from God, in contrast to the earth that may be cursed. In that sense it could be said that possessive agreement *far...* *-si* marks contrastive focus in the gloss.

“Pwyll, Lord of Dyfed” (19.22-24), we are first told how the main character got his name (and his name is clearly topical), and then we read the following sentence:

- (32) *Pryderi, heb y Penndaran, uyd y enw ef*
 P. said ART chieftain be.3SG.IMPV 3SG.M.POSS name 3SG.M
 ‘“Pryderi,” said the chieftain, “will be his name”’ (PKM 19.23f.)

In this sentence, the name *Pryderi* must be focal, so the possessive NP *y enw ef* cannot be focal as such; the only way we can maintain that possessive agreement is tied to the focal element of the sentence is to say that here the possessive markers *y...ef* are coreferent with the focus (*Pryderi*) and agree with it in person and number.¹⁹

However that may be, in Middle Welsh there are many instances in which there do not seem to be any particular pragmatic circumstances which would explain why the construction with possessive agreement was used. For example, in PKM we find the same expressions with and without possessive agreement, without any apparent pragmatic difference, as in the following two examples, in both of which a character is asking permission to leave:

- (33) *gan dy genyat*
 with 2SG.POSS permission
 ‘with your permission’ (PKM 14.7)
- (34) *gan dy genyat di*
 with 2SG.POSS permission 2SG
 ‘with your permission’ (PKM 13.24-5)²⁰

Again, we see that focality of the possessive NP (or one of its elements) is not a necessary condition for marking it with possessive agreement. It may be a sufficient condition, but there are probably certain other factors, besides the information structure, determining the occurrence of agreement in possessive

¹⁹ Cf. also PKM 30.21: *Ha wyr, heb y Matholwch, mae ych kynghor chwi?* [o man.PL, said ART Matholwch, what.is 2PL.POSS advice 2PL] “O men,” said Matholwch, “what is your advice?” Since the question word *mae* is focal, the possessive NP *ych kynghor chwi* ‘your advice’ can only be marked as coreferent with the focus of the sentence. Similarly in PKM 41. 26: *Mae, heb hi, dy gedymdeith ti a’th gwn?* [where.is, said she, 2SG.POSS companion 2SG and.2SG.POSS dog.PL] “Where,” she said, “are your companion and your dogs?”

²⁰ Cf. also PKM 33. 10-11, which is at the end of a passage in which it is said how Brân ordered his companions to cut off his head and bury it in London: *ac yna y las y benn ef* [and then PART cut.off.IMP.S.PRET 3SG.POSS head 3SG] ‘and then his head was cut off’. Here ‘his head’ cannot be focal, since it was mentioned several times in the preceding paragraph.

NPs. In an important paper, Aaron Griffith (2008) showed that the use of *notae augentes* on verbs with infixed pronouns in Old Irish is governed by animacy hierarchy, so that a *nota* may appear whenever a subject or object denoted by the *nota* is higher on the animacy hierarchy than the other argument. The hierarchy is structured so that the first person precedes the second person, which in turn precedes the third person human and third person non-human:

first person > second person > third person human > third person non-human

That means that a *nota* may appear on a verb whenever one of the arguments is the first person, but a second-person *nota* may appear only if there is no first person argument, etc.

Griffith also showed that *notae augentes* almost never refer to non-humans, and that they do not appear with verbs that have an overt subject or object.

Our examination of the use of possessive agreement constructions in the Würzburg Glosses has revealed that possessive agreement does not occur in possessive NPs with neuter, or inanimate possessors: not a single example of such a construction has been found, which is in agreement with Griffith's (2008) findings. Thus, we find only constructions like (35):

- (35) *ro-s-mbia* *a* *lóg*
 AUG-3PL-be.3SG.FUT 3SG.POSS payment
 'they will have payment for it' (Wb. 5d35)

This means that **ros-mbia a lóg-som* (with the 3 sg. *nota -som*) was presumably ungrammatical in the same sense as in (35).

In Middle Welsh, the animacy conditions in which possessive agreement occurs seem to be broadly similar to the Old Irish situation. As in Old Irish, there is no possessive agreement when the possessor is inanimate (e. g. when it occurs as the pronominal object of the verbal noun). We have examined all the possessive NPs in the "Four Branches of the Mabinogi" and found no instance of such a possessive construction (but further research is certainly required).

We can conclude, then, that while contrastive focus on the possessor is regularly expressed by constructions with possessive agreement in both Old Irish and Middle Welsh, and while in both languages this construction is incompatible with inanimate possessors, there are cases where no discernible pragmatic factors determine the use of possessive constructions with agreement. More research is certainly needed in this area.

5. Possessive agreement in Modern Irish and Modern Welsh

The usage of constructions with possessive agreement seems to have remained basically unchanged in MoIr. and MoW, although grammars of both languages usually claim that such constructions involve “emphasis”, or some similarly vague term. For example, Nancy Stenson (2020: 130-1) says that “when one wants to emphasize one possessor over another, a suffix [i. e. a *nota augens*] is added to the possessed noun for that purpose”; the examples she gives are *mo pháistese* ‘my child’ and *mo charrsa* ‘my car’ (where *-se/-sa* are the MoIr. forms of the 1st person sg. *nota augens*). Apparently, the use of possessive agreement in such examples corresponds to the English possessive constructions in which possessors are stressed for contrastive focus.

Similarly, in MoW, it is claimed that the possessive NPs with pronominal possessors in MoW express a slight emphasis on the possessor (Thorne 1993: 166), but the nature of that “emphasis” is unclear. At least for some native speakers (according to my informants) there is no difference in meaning between the constructions with and without possessive agreement.²¹

We see, then, that the problem of the function of possessive agreement in early forms of Insular Celtic is still relevant for the modern languages. To the best of our knowledge, no comparative or contrastive investigation of possessive agreement constructions in Modern Insular Celtic languages has been undertaken so far, and this paper is certainly not going to offer such an investigation, since it is limited to Old Irish and Middle Welsh. However, an analysis of possessive agreement constructions in Modern Irish and Welsh would be a great desideratum for future research in comparative Celtic linguistics.

6. The origin of possessive agreement in insular Celtic

The origin of the (at least for European languages) highly unusual possessive agreement constructions in Old Irish and Middle Welsh is quite unclear. Since the Brittonic languages express nominal possession by simple juxtaposition (unlike the Goidelic languages, where possessive genitive is used to mark the possessor), one could suppose that, in Middle Welsh, the possessive agreement construction arose as an extension of the usual pattern of expressing possession with two nouns (illustrated in (36)):

²¹ The difference may be stylistic; Davies (2016) says that the construction without the agreement (*fy mhen* ‘my head’) is characteristic of literary style, while the construction with agreement (*(fy) mhen i* ‘my head’) is more colloquial.

- (36) *pen y gwr*
 head ART man
 ‘the man’s head’

Originally, this was the usual, Indo-European possessive genitive construction, but as the case inflexion was lost in Brittonic, only the juxtaposition remained as an indicator of possession. If this construction was the starting point in the development of possessive agreement, one could assume that, in Middle Welsh, postnominal juxtaposition of the possessor was combined with the use of possessive pronouns in possessive NPs with pronominal possessors; this would result in the usual MW possessive agreement construction (37):

- (37) *fy mhen i*
 My head I
 ‘my head’

This hypothesis, however, cannot explain why possessive agreement did not spread precisely to the 3rd person singular with nominal possessors, where one would first expect it, i. e. why **y pen y gwr* (lit. ‘his head the man’) is ungrammatical. Therefore, the origin of possessive agreement must be different: it either goes back to a common, Proto-Insular Celtic construction, which then developed differently in MW and OIr., or it developed first in one branch of Insular Celtic, and then spread to the other as a result of language contact. The fact that possessive agreement is unattested in Old Welsh, as noted in Section 3, is not crucial, since OW is a language with a very limited corpus, and the presence of possessive agreement in both Middle Breton and Middle Cornish probably shows that the construction can be reconstructed in Proto-Brittonic. Therefore, if it does not go back to Proto-Insular Celtic, possessive agreement could have developed originally in Brittonic, and then spread by contact to Goidelic, or, vice versa, it may have been original in Goidelic and then spread to Brittonic. Also theoretically possible, but unlikely because of the lack of evidence, is the hypothesis that possessive agreement spread from some unknown substratum language into both Goidelic and Brittonic.

Although they are rather exceptional from the areal-typological point of view, the possessive agreement constructions in Irish and Welsh have not yet been noted in the context of the “Insular Celtic Substratum” theory (Wagner 1959, Isaac 2007, Hewitt 2007), probably because similar constructions, to the best of our knowledge, do not occur in Afro-Asiatic languages. However, they are very unusual from the point of view of “Standard Average European”, and their occurrence in Insular Celtic is therefore significant as an areal-typological feature. Like other such features, discussed in our previous work (Matasović

2007, Matasović in press),²² it appears likely that it developed by contact-induced change, and there is little reason to believe that it is inherited from a common Proto-Insular Celtic (or even Proto-Celtic) language. The arguments for this hypothesis are summarized below.

Although syntactically parallel, possessive agreement constructions are mostly expressed by different, etymologically unrelated elements in Brittonic and Goidelic: in Brittonic, person/number/gender agreement markers are nearly identical to free independent personal pronouns, which for the most part go back to Proto-Celtic and PIE personal pronouns. The third person singular masculine pronoun *ef* might be related to the 3rd person singular masculine/neuter *nota augens* *-som* in Old Irish, but the difference of the vowels is puzzling.²³ On the other hand, the *notae augentes* in Goidelic are clitics mostly without etymological exact cognates in Brittonic, and their history is not completely clear. The 3rd person masculine form, *-som*, presumably goes back to PCelt. **somo-* ‘same’ < PIE **som-Ho-* ‘same, one’ (Skt. *samá-* ‘same’, Gr. *homós* ‘one and the same’, Go. *sama* ‘same’, etc., Matasović 2009: 351); as mentioned earlier, this form may be related, but it is not identical to the MW pronoun *ef*. The 3rd person feminine form *-si* is the cliticized feminine personal pronoun (stressed *sí* < PIE **sih₂-*). OIr. 2nd person singular *-su*, *-siu* is perhaps derivable from the cliticized 2nd person pronoun **tū* (OIr. stressed *tú*, MW *ti*, Matasović 2009: 392-3), with the analogical addition of initial *s-* (probably under the influence of the 3rd person sg. *-som*, or by assimilation **-st-* > *-ss-* > *-s-* after nouns originally ending in **-s* in the nominative singular and plural).²⁴ The 1st person singular *nota augens*, *-sa*, is unclear. It is most probably formed from a deictic clitic **so* (Griffith 2010, 2018; see also Schrijver 1997: 22-23), originally identical to the deictic adverb *se* ‘now’ (e. g. in *co se* ‘until now’). On the other hand, the 1st and 2nd person plural forms

²² These features include the grammaticalized consonant mutations, the existence of inflected prepositions, the equative form of adjectives, the imperfect aspect with habitual meaning, the progressive aspect formed with the verb ‘to be’ and the verbal noun in a prepositional phrase, the preposed definite article, the expression of emotive predicates by abstract nouns in prepositional phrases, the expression of agent of passives by a prepositional phrase governed by the preposition meaning ‘with’, etc. For lexical evidence for language contacts between Goidelic, Brittonic and Latin in the early medieval period see Bauer 2017.

²³ MW *ef* would be derivable from **semo-* (Lewis and Pedersen 1989: 190), while OIr. *-som* points to **somo-* (Schrijver 1997: 50). The e-grade in this root is also found in Gr. *hén* ‘one’ (n.). From this, we could conclude that the PIE Ablaut of this root was preserved in Proto-Celtic. This is further corroborated by the existence of the PCelt. Particle **semiti-* ‘also’ (Matasović 2009: 329) > OIr. *emid* ‘as it were, nearly’, MW *hefyd* ‘too, also’, which can be derived from the root **sem-* and the particle **iti* (> Skt. *iti* ‘thus’). For a different etymology of MW *ef* (from reduplicated **em-em*) see Schrijver 1997: 87.

²⁴ Thurneysen (1946: 282) gives a different explanation: he connects the elements *-sa*, *-se* (1sg.) and *-su*, *-siu* (2sg.) with the demonstrative particles *-so*, *-sa* (from the PCelt. demonstrative pronoun **so*), but the details of this development remain unclear (see also Schrijver 1997: 19-20).

seem to be cliticized personal pronouns: *-si* is the cliticized form of the stressed pronoun *sí*, which comes from PCelt. **swīs* ‘you’, cf. MW *chwi*, OBret. *hui* (Matasović 2009: 365), and *-ni* is the cliticized form of *sní* < PCelt. **snīs* ‘we’ (MW *ni*, MBret. *ni*, *ny*, Matasović 2009: 349). The origin of the 3rd plural ending *-som* is unclear, but it is not related to the MW pronoun *wy*, *wynt*. It may be the same element as the 3sg. m. *-som* (< **somo-*), or, more likely, the generalized form of the neuter nominative accusative plural **somā*. Therefore, at least for the 1st person singular, 3rd person singular masculine, and 3rd person plural, no Common Insular Celtic possessive agreement markers can be reconstructed, and for the 2nd person singular the Common Insular Celtic origin of the OIr. *nota augens -su*, *-siu* is doubtful.

Although we believe that they carry some weight, the arguments expressed above are not conclusive: it may be that possessive agreement existed in Proto-Insular Celtic (or Proto-Celtic) and that the forms used to mark agreement were (unstressed?) forms of personal pronouns, as in MW, and that these forms were preserved only in the 1st and 2nd person plural, and the 3rd person singular feminine in Old Irish. The other *notae augentes* in OIr. would then be due to lexical replacement. However, this seems like a more complicated hypothesis than the alternative, hence Occam’s Razor should point to the conclusion that possessive agreement cannot be reconstructed in Proto-Insular Celtic (or Proto-Celtic).

7. Conclusion

The parallelism that exists in the syntax and functions of possessive agreement constructions in Goidelic and Brittonic cannot be due to chance. Moreover, in both Old Irish and Middle Welsh, essentially the same elements that are used in possessive agreement constructions are also used:

- A) after verbs, e. g. OIr. *tíagu=sa* ‘I go’ (Wb. 17b18), *as-bir”siu* ‘you say’ (Wb. 12b17), etc. In MW this is reflected in the overt use of personal pronouns after the inflected forms of the verb, e. g. *Llyna, y gwel-ei ef teulu a niuero-ed* [Look PRED see-IMPF.3SG 3SG troop and company-PL] ‘And there he saw troops and companies’ (PKM 3, 24). Since MW is a pro-drop language, this use of independent pronouns should be viewed as a particular instance of person-number agreement and it is certainly pragmatically marked with respect to constructions without overt pronouns.
- B) after inflected prepositions, e. g. OIr. *lem=sa* ‘with me’, *dom=sa* ‘to me’, *frit=su* ‘against you (sg.)’, *torun=ni* ‘over us’, etc. (Thurneysen 1946: 272); in MW, again, independent pronouns are used after inflected prepositions, e. g. *ac yna edrych o-honaw ef ar liw yr*

erchwys [and then look.VN from-3SG.M 3SG at colour ART pack] ‘and he looked at the colour of the pack (of hounds)’, PKM 1, 18.

- C) after personal pronouns: in Old Irish these are the emphatic forms of personal pronouns (Thurneysen 1946: 253f.), *me=sse* ‘I’, *tu=ssu* ‘you’, *é=som* ‘he’, *si=ssi* ‘she’, *sni=sni* ‘we’, *si=ssi* ‘you’, *hé=ssom* ‘they’; in Middle Welsh, these are the so-called “reduplicated pronouns” (Simon Evans 1964: 49): *mivi* (*myvi*), *tidi* (*tydi*), *hihi*, *nini*, *chwichwi* and *wyntwy*. Unlike in the other constructions in MW, the reduplicated pronoun is generally written together with the stressed independent personal pronoun.

All of this points to the conclusion that there is a historical connection between possessive agreement in Old Irish and in Middle Welsh. In this paper we have argued that it is more likely that the development of these constructions in both languages is due not to common inheritance, but to intensive language contacts in the Early Middle Ages. Several other such contact-induced features have already been found (Matasović 2007, Matasović in press), and possessive agreement may just be one more of them. On the other hand, we cannot completely exclude the possibility that constructions with repeated use of (cliticized) personal pronouns already had some pragmatically marked function in Proto-Insular Celtic or Proto-Celtic, e. g. as markers of contrastive focus.

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Abbreviations of cited texts

- CO = *Culhwch ac Olwen* (MW, middle of the 11th century); edition: R. Bromwich & D. Simon Evans (Cardiff 1992)
- EC = *Echtrae Chonnlaí* (OIr., 7th-8th centuries); edition: K. McCone (Maynooth 2000).
- PKM = *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (MW, late 11th century); edition: R. Mühlhausen (Göttingen 1988)
- SMMDT = *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* (OIr., 9th century); edition: R. Thurneysen (Dublin 1946).
- TBDD = *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (OIr., 8th century?); edition: E. Knott (Dublin 1975).
- TBF = *Táin bó Froich* (OIr., 8th century?); edition: W. Meid (Innsbruck 1970).
- Wb. = Würzburg Glosses (OIr., late 7th-8th centuries); edition: <https://wuerzburg.ie/index.html>
- All the other abbreviations are from GPC (for Welsh) and DIL (for Irish).