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Assessing Diachronic Meaning Change in the Topographical Vocabulary of Early Irish

Abstract

Drawing on a lexical field analysis of the topographical vocabulary of a significant body of Early Irish texts, this paper considers the general evidence for diachronic meaning change. The investigation focuses on a small number of particularly illustrative lexemes (viz. *inis* and *ailén* 'island', *tulach* and *cnocc* 'hill' and *lár* 'ground, floor; middle'), examining the contextual and collocational information in order to identify patterns of transitional usage. In conclusion the paper considers general practical and theoretical implications.

1. Introduction

Most of the scholarly energy devoted to the lexicon of the early periods of the Irish language has been expended on the fundamental work of dictionary making, while other aspects of lexical enquiry have remained the neglected Cinderella of Early Irish language studies (Jackson 1983: 17). Nonetheless, matters of vocabulary have been attracting some structured interest over the past twenty years, often in the Trier–Weisgerber tradition¹ and regularly based on variations of the von Wartburg and Buck classifications.² An extensive examination of the topographical vocabulary of the Old and Middle Irish periods (conventionally A.D. 600–900 and 900–1200 respectively), carried out by the author, allows consideration of text types as well as the contrasting of narrative usage and place–name embedding (Mac Mathúna 1988, 1990, 1993). However, the nature and range of the texts available conspire to cast a rather weak light on diachronic meaning change within this particular time–frame. Nonetheless, a small number of cases occurs where one lexical item succeeds another (e.g. *inis* yielding to *ailén* in the sense of 'island', *tulach* being superseded by *cnocc* in the sense of 'hill'), or where a significant semantic shift takes place, as in the case of *lár*, which altered its sense from 'ground, floor' to 'middle' in the period under discussion. The original sense of the latter was maintained by its prefixed derivative *airlár*, while *lár* in its new sense replaced *medón*, the earlier word for 'middle'. This paper concentrates on the occurrences of these three instances in the main body of Old and Middle Irish texts, supplemented by the evidence of the Royal Irish Academy's (*Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language* (= *DIL*)).³

2. Island

There are just two words for 'island' which were regularly used in Early Irish, viz. *inis* and *ailén*. But the fact that *ailén* is first attested in the Middle Irish period invites attention to its impact on the semantic range of *inis*, which had hitherto reigned alone, with no hint of its being marked.

DIL explains *inis* as 'an island (very common in place names); an island (often artificial) used as a storehouse or fort; in many poetic names of Ireland'. The Old Irish Glosses have yielded only two examples of *inis*, both of which occur together: *lassalar n dluith sechis las innuile talmuin. ón file im na insi immacuairdd. dlúith side didiu cenmuir dia etarscarad fochosmailius n inse* 'with the compact ground, that is, with the whole earth which is round about the islands. It is compact then, because there is no sea to separate it like islands.' (MI. 89 d 18). The contrast here is between islands in the sea, which of their nature are separated from one another by water, and compact land, which remains undivided. Nor is *inis* of frequent occurrence in the excerpted saga texts,⁴ there being only two instances, both in the same passage of the first recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*TBC-I*). Mac Roth's report of his reconnoitring runs: *co n-acca in tromchiaich ro lín na glendu na fántu co nderna na tilcha eturru amail indsi i llochaib*. 'I saw a dense mist which had filled the glens and valleys, so that it made the hills between them like islands in lakes.' (*TBC-I* 3558–60). The phrase *amail indsi i llochaib* 'like islands in lakes' is repeated by Fergus as he explains the phenomenon (*TBC-I* 3571).

Ailén 'island' does not occur at all in the collections of Glosses, and is to be found only once in *Bethu Phátraic* (i.e. *Trip.*²), a text conventionally dated to the margins of the Old and Middle Irish periods. This word is also missing from the excerpted saga texts of Old Irish, with the apparent exception of the place-name contained in *do Bélut Alióin* (*TBC-I* 1021). Its occurrence in the sense of a fortified island as an entry in the Annals of Ulster under the year A.D. 725, i.e. *Ailen m. Craich construitur* 'The [fortified] island of Crach's son is constructed' is certainly noteworthy (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983), but may be taken as indicating that the text of the entry was composed some 200 years after the event.

In Middle Irish *inis* and *ailén* coexist in a virtually synonymous relationship, as is evident from the following examples, which occur in the same passage of *Betha Brenainn Clúana Ferta: as foccus daoibh an toilen da ngoirter Talamh aithgellta na Naemh.... atát aingil Dé occ iomcoimhett na hinnsi sin*. 'and near to you is the island which is called the Promised Land of the Saints.... and the angels of God protect that island.' (*BNNÉ* i 50 §37). *Inis* alone is employed in §42 of the same Life in three references to an island of the ocean, the first of these being: *Ocus atconnairc inis álainn adhamhra forin occían co timtirect aingel impi*. 'And he saw on the ocean an island wondrous fair with attendance of angels about it.' But it is doubtful if any particular significance should be attached to the choice of either *inis* or *ailén* in this text, as *oilen* occurs twice on its own in the very next paragraph, §43.

DIL (s.v. *inis*) contains a similar citation in a text from the Early Modern period (i.e. A.D. 1200–1650): *for insedhibh uisccidhe no for olénibh mara* (Hugh Roe 178.14). Intriguingly, three of *DIL*'s six Early Modern examples (s.v. *ailén*) actually contain *inis* as well as *ailén*. These include: *boi C. isinn ailen a chend frisín coirthi rombái inn iarthar na hinsí*, (*IT* ii¹ 181.194), *ro indirset innsedha oiléna an locha* (*FM* ii 610.13) and *inis dimoir is mo do oilenuibh talman* (*Marco P.* 186). This strong tendency to use both lexemes together, which continued right through the Middle Irish period and down to the mid-way point of Early Modern Irish, must indicate either complete interchangeability of the lexemes or a felt need to retain the literary associations of *inis* as a perceived support for the neologism, *ailén*.

3. Hill

An earlier study (Mac Mathúna 1988) determined that *tulach*, the regular Early Irish word for 'hill', occurred just three times in the Milan Glosses (there being no place-name occurrence), and 17 times in *Bethu Phátraic* (with 9 place-name instances). On the other hand, *cnocc*, the word which ultimately superseded it in Modern Irish, is not to be found in this sense in the free text at all. It occurs just once in *Bethu Phátraic* and then, perhaps surprisingly, in a place-name, although this is in line with its attestation as a place-name element in the Book of Armagh *Notulae*, which are dated to the eighth or ninth century. However, the primary sense of *cnocc*, viz. 'lump, protuberance', is that which regularly occurs in Old Irish texts. Similarly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and several short saga tales yielded no example whatsoever of *cnocc*, whereas in *TBC-I tulach* occurred 32 times in the narrative text and once in a place-name.

Of interest is the later use of *cnocc* 'hill' in descriptions of Tory Island, Co. Donegal and Rathlin Island, Co. Antrim in the Late Middle Irish *Acallam na Senórach*: *gu Cnoc in fomhoraich budhthuidh, re n-abar Torach thuaiscirt Eirenn* 'to the Hill of the Fomorian in the north, which is called Torach of the north of Ireland' (*Acall.* 1880–2), and *a Cnuc Árdmulla amuigh don mhuir, risi n-abar Rachlainn nó Rachrainn isin tan-sa* 'from Cnoc Ardmulla from out of the sea, which is called Rachlainn or Rachrainn now' (*Acall.* 3643–5). Intrinsically, of course, a direct connection between 'height' and 'island' is quite plausible, for, in the former case one is describing a piece of land which is jutting up over the surrounding terrain, in the latter, a piece of land which is rising up above the surrounding sea. In this connection, we can recall Mac Roth's comparison of hills to islands, quoted already with regard to *inis* (*TBC-I* 3558–60).

4. Lár

DIL explains *lár* as '(a) Surface, ground, floor, (b) interior, middle', but maintains that the distinction of meanings is not always clear-cut, and that its classification of examples must be regarded as somewhat arbitrary.

It is not without significance that the Glosses would seem to contain no instance of *lár* in the dictionary's sense (b), 'interior, middle', there being no attestation at all of *lár* in either the Würzburg or St. Gall Glosses. In the Milan Glosses, *lár* glosses Lat. *solum*, e.g. *ond lár gl. ab solo patrio* (*MI*. 22 a 3). The example at *MI*. 89 d 18, cited above under *inis*, actually employs both *lár* and *talam* as equivalents, the phrase with *talam* glossing that containing *lár*.

In the saga literature, when not actually more closely specified by a genitive which it is governing, *lár* means 'ground, surface of the earth'. This can clearly be seen by examining an occurrence in *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, where Cet mac Mágach is describing a foray he made eastwards into the land of the Ulstermen. The Ulster warrior Lám Gábaid cast a great spear at him: *Tarlaic urchor do gai mór form-sa. Dos-leicim-se do in ngai cétna co-mbert a laim de, co-mboi for lár*. 'He cast a shot of a great spear at me. I throw the same spear at him so that it took his hand off him, so that it was on the ground.' (*SMMD*² §10.7–9). At this point Rawlinson B. 512 uses the word *achad* 'expanse of ground, pasture, field' to locate the hand: *co-raib hi isind achad ina fíadnaisi*. 'so that it was in the field before him.' (*SMMD*² p. 10 = R §10). Later, just as Cet was about to divide the pig the Ulster hero Conall Cernach arrived: *Is and tarblaing for lár in tige*. 'He leapt down on to the floor of the house.' (*SMMD*² §15.2–3). However, the semantic shift of *lár* to 'centre, middle' is evident in *Acallam na Senórach*: *.i. ingen rig Eirenn do breith co lar in fedha diamair*, 'to have the daughter of the king of Ireland brought to the middle of the secret wood' (*Acall*. 4146), but even in this Late Middle Irish text the older sense of 'ground, floor' predominates.

The formation of the Late Middle Irish compound *lármedón* 'very centre' combining *lár* and *medón* 'middle, centre (of space or time)', which it ultimately displaced, may be taken as the *terminus ad quem* for the transition of *lár* to its second sense, cf. *co rucatar leo é ar lar medón a catha fodéin* 'so that they brought it with them to the very middle of their own company' (*CRR* 47) and ... *co lár medhóin* (leg. *lármedhón*) *ind átha* '... to the centre of the ford' (*Fianaig*. 88.13–4). The potential ambiguity of *lár* in its primary sense was often overcome by having it govern the semantically obvious *talam* 'ground, surface of the earth' in the genitive singular. But the conflict between 'surface' and 'middle' was ultimately resolved by the elimination of the sense 'surface' (with the exception of certain fixed expressions), by the replacement of *lár* in this sense by its derivative, *airlár* 'level surface, used in various applications' (in current Modern Irish regularly 'floor') and by the encroachment of *talam* 'ground'. On the other hand, having been dislodged by *lár*, *medón* 'middle, centre' became restricted to certain fixed phrases.

5. Conclusion

All three items outlined allow juxtaposition of place-name occurrences alongside narrative ones. *Inis*, *tulach* and *lár* (in its sense of 'ground') belong essentially to the Old and Early Middle Irish periods, the break-off point being approximately A.D. 1000. Significantly, it is these three words, and *medón* in the sense 'middle, centre', which are to be met with in established place-names such as *Inis Meáin*, the 'island of the middle', the central one of the three Aran Islands of Co. Galway, and of a similar group of three islands off the north-west Co. Donegal coast. It needs emphasising, however, that the three semantic developments considered here are the exceptions, the rule being that no dramatic changes were undergone by the vast majority of the topographical lexemes within the period of Early Irish. Such semantic shifts as there were tended to be gradual, and are perceptible only under close textual scrutiny. We have found lexeme replacement of *inis* by *ailén* and of *tulach* by *cnocc* at one point on the spectrum of diachronic meaning change. Further along is the phenomenon of abandonment whereby *lár* deserted this particular lexical field in order to replace *medón*. Most of the other lexemes display a less obvious semantic gradation, but one which also yields up its intricacies to contextual and collocational analysis.

As it happens, the three cases discussed reflect complementary tendencies: (i) 'part of the human body' > 'physical feature' (*cnocc*) is but one instance of a widespread trend in Irish; (ii) terminological replacement within Irish (*inis* > *ailén*) is a clear example of a development which usually occurs more gradually, and (iii) individual defection to another semantic field, leaving a certain amount of instability in its wake (the exit of *lár*, which succeeded *medón*).

The replacement of *inis* by *ailén* reflects the ever-present need to ensure that lexemes have the power to impress themselves on the consciousness of speakers, and the fact that this was regularly achieved from within a particular semantic field (in this case that of topography). The shift 'part of the human body' > 'physical feature of the landscape' is probably the single most common source of new members of the field (Mac Mathúna 1990:145–50). On the other hand, the particular sense development undergone by *lár* would seem to be an individual happening. So it can be seen that general tendencies of renewal coexist side by side with individual, less predictable developments which are generated by more wayward creative forces. The next step in this inquiry will be to establish for the topographical vocabulary of Early Irish the overall proportion of changes falling within each category, as a prelude to assessing their validity as general tendencies of semantic change within Irish and other languages.

Notes

- 1 For bibliographical references see Schmidt (1973:479–82) and Coseriu and Geckeler (1981:79–81).
- 2 See Hallig and von Wartburg (1963) and Buck (1949).
- 3 1913–75. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy. Unless otherwise indicated, the abbreviations used are those of *DIL*.
- 4 Knott (1963), Meid (1970), O'Rahilly (1976), Shaw (1976), Thurneysen (1951).

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