

Equative and abstract in Celtic (with notes on Uralic)

Introduction

I propose to explain the various equative formations of Insular Celtic by showing their relationship to abstract noun formations and adducing functional parallels from Uralic (notably Khanty as well as certain Finnic and Sami languages)

Synopsis of forms

(a) The most widespread formation is found throughout Insular Celtic, with traces in Gaulish, makes use of a prefix derived from Proto-Celtic **kom-* (e.g. Old Irish *commór* “equally large”, Middle Welsh *kyhyt* “equally long”). It does not partake in suppletion and is best regarded as derivational in synchronic terms.

(b) Old Irish, the most archaic member of the Goidelic branch, employs three suffixes: the regular *-ithir* and *-idir* (/ʲəθʲəɾʲ/ and /ʲəðʲəɾʲ/ respectively) and a more marginal *-ir* (/əɾʲ/ ~ /iɾʲ/ ~ /ɾʲ/); e.g. *dénithir* “as swift”, *lir* “as many”.

(c) The languages of the Brythonic branch instead employ variations of the suffix *-het* /hed/ (e.g. Middle Welsh *glaned* “as clean”). It is frequently combined with reflexes of the aforementioned **kom-*.

Origins

The suffix *-het* and its variants are to be derived from a Proto-Brythonic **-is-eto-*, containing the zero-grade of the Indo-European primary comparative suffix and a less transparent member **-eto-* which MCCONE 1994 explains as an ordinal suffix resulting from reanalysis of Proto-Celtic **k^wink^we-to-s* “fifth” as **k^wink^w-eto-s*. He then derives Old Irish *-ithir* from **-is-etero-*, remodelled from hypercharacterized **-is-tero-* under the influence of the **-is-eto-*. This is problematic, as it explains neither the palatal quality of the Goidelic suffix nor the Brythonic propensity for substantival use of equatives (cf. Middle Welsh *cochet* “intense redness”). It would also require the extended co-existence of two suffixes with closely related function, only for one to completely replace the other in Goidelic and Brythonic separately, and with each branch favoring a different suffix.

Building on JASANOFF 1991, 186–8, I argue instead that **-eto-* is to be explained as an abstract-forming suffix, specifically a thematized version of **-et-* (for which see IRSLINGER 2002, 57–60). The function of formations in **-is-eto-*, being abstract substantives derived from comparative adjectives, would thus have been to designate an intense or striking quality. For Brythonic, this not only fits formally, but also explains both the existence of “substantival equatives” and the prevalent “admirative-exclamative” semantics of *-het*.

The palatal rhotic in the Old Irish suffix, meanwhile, can be explained by reference to certain irregular equatives, type *móir* < **mārī*, which were originally genitive of abstract noun, type **māro-*. Compare constructions such as German “ein Hund von der Größe eines Pferdes”, displaying use of an abstract noun in a genitival construction with equative function. From these, a suffix **-rī* was generalized to the regular equative formation in Goidelic, explaining the the Old Irish suffix.

Parallels

The thesis that a deadjectival abstract is at the root of the Insular Celtic suffixal equatives will be

bolstered by general semantic considerations and the parallels found in Uralic (pointed out by ALVRE 1987), where a connection between abstract and equative formations is more transparent.

References

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