

# Agreement with coordinated subjects in Old Irish

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## Introduction and Problem

The Bardic Syntactical Tracts (BST)<sup>1</sup> make the following observation on subject-verb agreement:

- (1) *‘Tánuig . Tadhg 7 Brían don bhaile’ agus ‘tángadar don bhaile Brían 7 Tad(h)g’ as .c. ann ; ní .c. a iollradh do dhénamh nó go ttí ní eatarra mur sin.*  
“‘Tadhg and Brian came (sg) to the village’, and ‘Brian and Tadhg came (pl) to the village.’ That is right. Using the plural number is not right, until something comes between them [i.e. the subject and the verb] like that.”  
(McKenna 1979: 41.12-13)

In other words:

- singular agreement (*tánuig*) is appropriate with a conjoined subject (*Tadhg 7 Brían*) when the subject is immediately after the verb
- plural agreement (*tángadar*) is appropriate when the conjoined subject is further away from the verb.

The tract clarifies the rule as follows:

- (2) *‘Tánuig Brían don bhrugh is Barrdhubh...’ .c. ‘tánuig don bhrugh Brían 7 Barrdhubh’ .l.*  
“‘Brian came (sg) to the hill, and Barrdhubh...’, right; ‘Brian and Barrdhubh came (sg) to the hill’, wrong.”  
(McKenna 1979: 41.15-17)

That is:

- separating conjoined subjects from each other with some material does not change the agreement pattern (i.e. use a singular verb)
- a singular verb is wrong when conjoined subjects are separated from it by something

A final clarification of the rule is found in elsewhere in BST:

- (3) *‘nir g(h)on D(omhnall) na T(adhg) mhe’, ‘nir ghonadar me Domhnall na T(adhg)’, .c. iad ar lorg an aguis agus .c.s. orra.*  
“‘Neither Domhnall nor Tadhg hit (sg) me’, ‘neither Domhnall nor Tadhg hit (pl) me’, they are right in the same way as [subjects linked by] *agus* and they are taken as a [combined plural] subject.”  
(McKenna 1979: 97.34-35).

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<sup>1</sup> The BST describe the language of bardic poetry prior to 1500 (Classical Modern Irish).

In other words: *na / ná* ‘or’ and *agus* ‘and’ behave the same way.

Summary of the rules in the BST circa 1500:

- conjoined NP subjects take a singular verb when immediately following the verb
- conjoined NP subjects take a plural verb when separated from the verb

Our interpretation of these rules:

- There is first conjunct agreement with conjoined subjects immediately following the verb.
- When conjoined subjects are separated from the verb, the verb is plural because the true subject is a null pronominal *pro* with 3pl features.

Questions:

- Do these rules apply to Early Irish (700-1200)?
- Does the presence of material following the subjects affect agreement?<sup>2</sup>

### Description of data

To answer the research questions we assembled a database of 24 Early Irish texts. Given the assertions in the BST and our research questions, we divided the data according to:

- the number of the subject coordinands (singular vs. plural)<sup>3</sup>
- the number of the verb (singular vs. plural vs. ambiguous)
- whether non-clitic material intervenes between the verb and subject
- whether material follows the subject (= medial subject) or not (= final subject)

N-#		Medial Subject				Final Subject				Totals
		sg+sg	sg+pl	pl+pl	pl+sg	sg+sg	sg+pl	pl+pl	pl+sg	
<b>No Int.</b>	<b>V-sg</b>	67 <sup>a</sup>	7 <sup>b</sup>	0	0	35 <sup>c</sup>	1 <sup>d</sup>	2	0	112
	<b>V-pl</b>	2	0	11 <sup>e</sup>	5 <sup>f</sup>	0	0	16 <sup>g</sup>	0	34
	<b>V-sg/pl</b>	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
<b>Int.</b>	<b>V-sg</b>	12	0	0	0	16	0	0	0	28
	<b>V-pl</b>	1 <sup>h</sup>	1 <sup>i</sup>	1 <sup>j</sup>	2 <sup>k</sup>	7 <sup>l</sup>	1 <sup>m</sup>	4 <sup>n</sup>	0	17
	<b>V-sg/pl</b>	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Totals</b>										194

### Excluding ambiguous examples

This “first pass” can be winnowed down by excluding some ambiguous examples:

<sup>2</sup> The relevance of this question for Early Irish is suggested by Lash (2014), which establishes several subject positions for the language.

<sup>3</sup> Old Irish nouns can also be dual, but these pattern with plurals, since the verbs have no dual forms. In the case of more than two coordinands, only the first two are recorded in the table.

- ambiguous verbal ending (3 exx.; see 4a);
- ambiguous appositional subjects (6 exx.; see 4b);
- ambiguous analysis as subject coordination or V or VP gapping (11 exx.; see 4c);

(4) a. *fo-dáilte*                      *iar suidiu*      *biad*    7      *lind*    *dóib...*  
**was.divided.3S/3P**    **after that**      **food**    **and**    **ale**    **to.them**  
 “Food and ale was (= [fo'dál't̪əɾ]) / were (= [fo'dál'd̪əɾ]) distributed to them afterwards...”  
 (FB l.187)

b. *Bemít-ne*      *messe*    7      *tussu*    *ar*      *gnúis*      *in*  
**will-be.1P-1P**    **I**      **and**    **you**    **in**      **presence**    **the**  
*dúileman*      *ann sin*  
**creator**      **then**  
 “Then we, you and I, will be in the presence of the creator.”  
 (BB 64a; Stokes 1877: pg. 70, l.8)

c. *Téit*    *Cú Ruí*      *dia*    *thig*    7      *Munremur*    *do Emain Macha.*  
**go.3S**    **Cú Rói**      **to.his house**    **and**    **Munremur**    **to Emain Macha**  
 “Cú Rói goes to his house and Munremar to Emain Macha.”  
 (TBC<sup>1</sup> l.1623)

Excluding such examples yields:

N-#		Medial Subject				Final Subject				Totals
		sg+sg	sg+pl	pl+pl	pl+sg	sg+sg	sg+pl	pl+pl	pl+sg	
<b>No</b>	<b>V-sg</b>	61 <sup>a</sup>	5 <sup>b</sup>	0	0	35 <sup>c</sup>	0	2	0	103
<b>Int.</b>	<b>V-pl</b>	1	0	10 <sup>d</sup>	5 <sup>e</sup>	0	0	16 <sup>f</sup>	0	32
<b>Int.</b>	<b>V-sg</b>	10	0	0	0	12	0	0	0	22
	<b>V-pl</b>	1 <sup>g</sup>	1 <sup>h</sup>	1 <sup>i</sup>	2 <sup>j</sup>	7 <sup>k</sup>	1 <sup>l</sup>	4 <sup>m</sup>	0	17
<b>Totals</b>										174

Note 1: the shaded cells are NOT predicted by the rules in the BST.

The following exemplify the unproblematic cases (from the standpoint of the BST):

(5) a. V-sg, Sg+Sg, No Int., Medial  
*Atá*    *a*      *lecht*    7      *a*      *lía*    *forsint sligi*    *ocon*    *glais.*  
**Be.3S**    **his**    **grave**    **and**    **his**    **stone**    **on.the road**    **at.the**    **stream**  
 “His grave and headstone are on the road beside the stream.”  
 (TBC<sup>1</sup> l.1006)

b. V-sg, Sg+Pl, No Int., Medial  
*O*      *'d-chonnaire*    *Dubthach*    7      *a*      *bráthir-si*  
**when**    **saw.3S**              **Dubthach**    **and**    **her**    **brothers-3S**

*sin, gellsat nach epertha fria*  
**that promised that.not would.be.told to.her**  
*dul co fer do grés.*  
**going to man forever**

“When Dubthach and her brothers saw that, they promised that she would not ever be ordered to marry a man.”

(BB 63b; Stokes 1877: 64, l.32)<sup>4</sup>

- c. V-sg, Sg+Sg, No Int., Final

*Ar is di búaiB atá a airechas 7 a*  
**for COP from cows BE.3S his nobility and his**  
*eneclann.*  
**honor price**

“For it is from cows that his nobility and honor price exist.” (CG §13)

- d. V-pl, Pl+Pl, No Int., Medial

*Ro gabtha súind 7 slipre doib.*  
**were.taken.3P stakes and wattles from.them**

“Stakes and wattles were taken from them.”

(BB 65a; Stokes 1877: 78, l.1)

- e. V-pl, Pl+Sg, No Int., Medial

*Ragmai-ne 7 Fergus for Bernas n-Ulad.*  
**will.go.1P-1P and Fergus on BernasUlstermen**

“I and Fergus shall go to Bernas of the Ulstermen.” (TBC<sup>1</sup> l.1035)

- f. V-pl, Pl+Pl, No Int., Final

*Ní samlaid immurgu ind flaith ad-chosnat*  
**NEG like.it however the kingdom strive.3P**  
*ind nóib 7 ind fireóin.*  
**the saints and the righteous.ones**

“However, this is not what the kingdom which the saints and the righteous strive after is like.” (OIH s.78)

- g. V-pl, Sg+Sg, Int., Medial

*Nos marbtais immorro Doilín ocus Daithlend*  
**PTC.3P(o) killed.3P(s) however D. and D.**  
*cach toffond ar úair ara mbélaib-side .i. dá*  
**each hunt in turn before.them-3P i.e. two**  
*choin Maele Fothartaig.*  
**dogs M. F.**

“In every hunt after the other, Doilín and Daithlenn, i.e. the two hounds of Mael Fothartaig, used to kill them [the prey] before the those [other]ones.” (FR s.66)

- h. V-pl, Sg+Pl, Int., Medial

<sup>4</sup> This could also be construed “Dubthach 7 a bráthirsi”; bráthirse “kindred, kinship, brotherhood”.

*Batar didiu int imper 7 na*  
**were.3P moreover the emperor and the**  
*rig ina tost.*  
**kings in.their silence**

“Moreover, the emperor and the kings were silent.” (PH 640)

i. V-pl, Pl+Pl, Int., Medial

*Ro chomailset didiu apstail 7 discipuil*  
**fulfilled.3P(s).3S(o) moreover apostles and disciples**  
*Ísu Crist meic Dé bíi, hi beos martire*  
**Jesus Christ son God living likewise martyrs**  
*7 áncharait in choimded, noib 7 noebóga*  
**and anchorites the Lord saints and virgins**  
*in domain archena.*  
**the world besides**

“The apostles and disciples of Jesus Christ, son of the living God, fulfilled it also, the martyrs and anchorites of the Lord, the saints and holy virgins of the world besides. (BB 61b; Stokes 1877: 52, l.9)

j. V-pl, Pl+Sg, Int., Medial

*‘Ro·gellsam’ ol Mongán 7 in fili ucut*  
**wagered.1P said Mongán and the poet yonder**  
*im aided Fothaid Airgtig.’*  
**about dead F. A.**

“‘We have wagered’ said Mongán ‘the poet yonder and I, about the death of Fothad Airgtech.’ (CM 2 §11)

k. V-pl, Sg+Sg, Int., Final

*Do·gníat coria iarom Munremur 7 Cú Ruí.*  
**make.3P peace then Muinremar and Cú Roí**

“Then Muinremar and Cú Roí make peace.” (TBC<sup>1</sup> l.1622)

l. V-pl, Sg+Pl, Int., Final

*Ardo·petet iarom a n-áes ciúil 7 airfite,*  
**perform.3P(s).3P(o) then the people music and players**  
*céin botha oc taisbénad na flede dóib.*  
**while there.was at spreading the feast for.them**

“While the feast was being spread for them, the musicians and players perform for them.” (FB l.144)

m. V-pl, Pl+Pl, Int., Final

*.i. atluchetar duit-siu, a mo choimdiu,*  
**i.e. give.thanks.3P to.you-2S oh my lord**  
*th'uili gnímrada 7 t'uili nóib.*  
**your-all works and your-all saints**

“i.e. All your works and all your saints give thanks to you, oh my lord.” (OIH s.2)

First observation: Medial vs. Final subject does not appear to have an influence on agreement with coordinated subjects.

Second observation: first conjunct agreement appears to explain more examples than the rules in BST.

So, either:

- exx. in row 3 of the table are “funny” (i.e. the BST was right)
- exx. in row 4 of the table are “funny” (i.e. first conjunct agreement is the rule)

Let us examine row 3, where a singular verb is separated from conjoined subjects by some other element.

Nearly all examples involve a passive or intransitive verb.

- (6) *Atá sund ocut a máthair a n-athair, .i.*  
**is.3S there yonder their mother their father i.e**  
*Rían 7 Gabar, 7 Finnabair reside a n-athar*  
**R. and G. and F. story.teller their father**  
*Ríangabra.*

**R.**

“Over there is their mother and their father (Rían and Gabar) and Finnabair, the story teller of their father Ríangabar.”<sup>5</sup>

(LMDD §29)

- (7) *In tan tra mbis isna riaglaib ‘superponat’ nó ‘superpositio’,*  
**when however is.3S in.the rules s. or s.**  
*do leith fitt 7 do leith troscud is dir in sin.*  
**to half ration and to half fast is proper that**  
 “When, however, there is in the Rules ‘superponat’ or ‘superposition’, [this is] properly applicable to a half ration and half fast.”  
 (MT s.491)

- (8) *Ansait and sin trá co rrubud and Cáur*  
**waited.3P in.3S that then so was.killed.3S in.it C.**  
*mac Da Láth 7 Láth mac Da Bró 7 Foirc*  
**son D. L. and L. son D. B. and F.**  
*mac Trí nAigneach 7 Srubgaile mac Eóbith.*  
**son Tr. A. and S. m. E.**  
 “They waited there then so that Caur mac Da Láth and Lác mac Da Bró and Foirc mac Trí nAigneach and Srubgaile mac Eóbith were killed there.”  
 (TBC<sup>1</sup> l.1734)

- (9) *Do-rochair and cétamus Mess Dead mac Amargin*  
**fell.3S in.3S first M. D. son A.**  
*7 Briannán Brethach 7 Connlae 7 Béothach*

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<sup>5</sup> Does this actually make sense?

and B. B. and C. and B.  
 7 Conáed mac Mornai 7 sochaide olchenae.  
 and C. son M. and many.others besides

“There fell accordingly there first, Mess Deäd mac Amairgin and Briännán Brethach and Connlæ and Béothach and Conáed mac Mornai and many others besides.”

(TE 1.113)

- (10) *Ro iarfacht de in draí 7 a ben: ‘In*  
**asked.3S of.3S the druid and his wife INT.COP**  
*maith lesaigesinn óg in áirge?’*  
**well tend the virgin the herd**

“The druid and his wife asked of him, ‘does the virgin tend the herd well?’”

(Stokes 1877: 60; BB 63a)

There is one transitive example in this row:

- (11) *Fo-ngera cach n-ernail, [oire nundem member uili*  
**Inflame.3S every part [since COP.1P member all**  
*du Dea], nach cessathocus na galar bess.*  
**of God] any suffering and any illness which.is**  
*faire chomnessam.*  
**on.its neighbor**

“...that whatever suffering and whatever ailment that is on its neighbor should inflame every part, [since we all are members of God].”

(CH s.22)

There are two possible ways to account for this:

- this may reflect an archaic syntax of *ocus* ‘and’ requiring first-conjunct agreement (Griffith 2012);
- it may be structurally ambiguous, i.e. subject medial, and thus require a different analysis, but we do not (yet) have the data to support this sufficiently.

### Some analysis

Why might the intransitives and passives behave differently?

- These may be expletive-associate constructions: the expletive “there” is the true subject and requires singular agreement (cf. the translation of (7)). The apparent subjects are rather associates.

Compare the two examples of coordinated plural subjects with a singular verb:

- (12) *Or do-baitheadh a cuirnn 7 a cuaich ac Ath Enaigh.*  
**for was.lost.3S his horns and his goblets at Ath Enaigh**  
 “For his horns and his goblets were lost at Ath Enaigh.”  
 (TDH s.8)

- (13) *Do-baithed a fuis meisi ⁊ a cuirnn ann.*  
**was.lost.3S his servants table and his horns there**  
 “And his table servants and his drinking horns were lost therein.”  
 (Three Drinking Horns of Cormac mac Airt 2)

- Singular intransitive verb was possible with adjacent plural coordinands.
- *ann* “therein” later becomes the expletive *ann* “there” in Modern Irish (McCloskey 2014).
- Exx. like (13) may have served as bridging contexts for this development.

### Transitives

Different pattern with non-adjacent subjects but plural verb agreement:

- transitives more common
- intransitives and passive do occur

- (14) a. *Nos marbtais immorro Doilín agus Daithlenn*  
**PTC.3P(o) killed.3P(s) however D. and D.**  
*cach toffond ar úair ara mbélaib-side .i. dá*  
**each hunt in turn before.them-3P i.e. two**  
*choin Maele Fothartaig.*  
**dogs M. F.**

“In every hunt after the other, Doilín and Daithlenn, i.e. the two hounds of Máel Fothartaig, used to kill them [the prey] before the those [other] ones.”  
 (FR s.66)

- b. *Do-gníat coria iarom Munremur ⁊ Cú Ruí.*  
**make.3P peace then Muinremar and Cú Roí**  
 “Then Muinremar and Cú Roí make peace.” (TBC<sup>1</sup> l.1622)

- c. *o ró-sinset a láma chuci in draí ⁊ in*  
**after stretched.3P their hands to.it the druid and the**  
*chumal...*  
**slave.girl**  
 “...after the druid and the slave stretched their hands to it...”  
 (BBr 62b)

- d. *ci as-ingbat árim désillabche compariti ⁊ superlati*  
**that exceed.3P number disyllabism comparatives and superlatives**  
 “...that comparatives and superlatives should exceed the number of disyllabism.”  
 (Sg 44b3)

- e. *Ro chomailset didiu apstail ⁊ descipuil*  
**fulfilled.3P(s).3S(o) moreover apostles and disciples**  
*Ísu Crist meic Dé bíi, hi beos martire*  
**Jesus Christ son God living likewise martyrs**



7      *áncharait*      *in*      *choimded,*      *noib*      7      *noebóga*  
**and anchorites the Lord saints and virgins**  
*in domain archena.*  
**the world besides**

“The apostles and disciples of Jesus Christ, son of the living God, fulfilled it also, the martyrs and anchorites of the Lord, the saints and holy virgins of the world besides. (BB 61b; Stokes 1877: 52, l.9)

f. *Ardo-petet*      *iarom a*      *n-áes*      *ciúil*      7      *airfite,*  
**perform.3P(s).3P(o) then the people music and players**  
*céin botha*      *oc*      *taibénad*      *na*      *flede*      *dóib.*  
**while there.was at spreading the feast for.them**

“While the feast was being spread for them, the musicians and players perform for them.” (FB l.144)

### Intransitives

(15) a. *Batar*      *didiu*      *int*      *imper*      7      *na*  
**were.3P moreover the emperor and the**  
*rig ina*      *tost.*  
**kings in.there silence**

“Moreover, the emperor and the kings were silent.” (PH 640)

b. *.i.*      *atluchetar*      *duit-siu,*      *a*      *mo*      *choimdiu,*  
*i.e.*      **give.thanks.3P**      **to.you-2S**      **oh**      **my**      **lord**  
*th'uili*      *gnímrada*      7      *t'uili*      *nóib.*  
**your-all works and your-all saints**

“i.e. All your works and all your saints give thanks to you, oh my lord.” (OIH s.2)

### Conclusions

It appears that the BST were, at least in large part, correct:

- first conjunct agreement is required when the subject immediately follows the verb
- When conjoined subjects are separated from the verb, the verb is plural because the true subject is a null pronominal *pro* with 3pl features.

The rules must be slightly modified, however:

- Intransitives and passives may take singular verbal agreement, regardless of the word order.
  - Conditions on optionality are not yet clear.
  - In light of this observation, the fact that BST uses an intransitive verb to illustrate the agreement rule may indicate a historical change between early Irish and the language described by BST (late 12<sup>th</sup> c. – 1500).
  - Sometimes occurs also with non-coordinated subjects (see Lash in preparation?).

It does not appear that material after subject has any effect on the agreement patterns.

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