Gerald O’Nolan’s Approach to Peadar Ua Laoghaire’s Irish

It can be fairly claimed that Studies in Modern Irish: Part 1 produced by Gerald O’Nolan in 1919 occupies an indispensable position among the resources available to students of Muskerry Irish. This is because the grammar books available today generally do not aim to be reference aids that can be used when reading Munster Irish of the sort published early in the 20th century, before the Caighdeán Oifigiúil came out. Furthermore, there are a number of thorny areas of Irish grammar that are hard for learners to research, not being covered even in the longer Irish-language reference grammars available today, such as Graiméar Gaeilge na mBráithre Criostai. At some point, students of Muskerry Irish, and possibly Munster Irish more widely, will be looking for more detailed explanations that cover the forms they are meeting in literature.

Studies in Modern Irish is not a full grammar book, but rather a survey of some of the more knotty aspects of Irish grammar, analysing them in a forensic detail, although slipping up in some of the details of O’Nolan’s analysis. It is striking that nearly all of the example sentences adduced in the book are from the works of Peadar Ua Laoghaire. Indeed, many of the example sentences whose origin is not explicitly noted are also taken verbatim from works by Ua Laoghaire, including Séadna, Niamh, Mo Sgéal Féin, and many others. A number of examples of rarer points are given from Geoffrey Keating. There is very little discussion of Connacht or Ulster Irish, and the overriding assumption is that Ua Laoghaire’s Irish was grammatically correct and provided a standard for learners of Irish.

Consequently, the approach of the book is to produce grammatical explanations that will reconcile all the syntactical forms used by Ua Laoghaire. For example, if Ua Laoghaire failed to decline the noun in certain circumstances, then an overarching approach had to be found that would justify all such uses. On occasion, the search for an explanation that would render every sentence in Ua Laoghaire’s works grammatically comprehensible leads O’Nolan astray, such as with his attempt to explain non-use of a declined vocative (see the discussion below). In general, however, the explanations here fit Muskerry Irish much better than those given in sources dealing with Standard Irish, to the extent that the grammatical forms used in Ua Laoghaire’s works are hard to understand aright without a close familiarity with O’Nolan’s explanations.

However, the reader will need to bear in mind that the explanations given here sometimes clash with those of Graiméar Gaeilge na mBráithre Criostai. In the light of this, it is my intention here to review O’Nolan’s grammatical theories and assess their utility for readers of Muskerry Irish. As O’Nolan was focused on explaining the ‘rules’ of the Irish language for learners, the discussion here will deal with the presentation of Irish grammar for students of Irish, and not the more recent analysis conducted in academic circles over the past few decades on issues such as the relation of Irish grammar to universal grammar rules governing a Verb-Subject-Object language and on questions such as whether the Irish copula is really to be analysed as a mood particle, and not a verb. O’Nolan was not attempting to make a contribution to general linguistic science, but to teach Irish, as is shown by the fact that each section of his work here is accompanied by exercises, the key to which was published separately. His approach to Irish grammar was corpus-based, albeit with only one author, Peadar Ua Laoghaire, in the corpus: the rules O’Nolan posits are not intended to shed light on theories of transformational generative grammar, but simply have to be able to explain all sentences found in Ua Laoghaire’s extensive output of Irish literature. O’Nolan’s presentation of Irish grammar does not necessarily seek to explain the Irish of other writers or the Irish of other dialects.

I will look at O’Nolan’s views under four headings here: 1) the copula, and the way in which O’Nolan’s presentation differs from that of later grammars; 2) relative clauses, and his wrestling with the numerous exceptions that govern the use of direct and indirect relative clauses; 3) ellipsis, and his presentation of the ways in which many Irish phrases appear to reflect a truncation of a
longer underlying phrase; and 4) his discussion of apparent irregularities in declension and the failure to decline the vocative, genitive and dative cases of nouns.

1. The Copula

O’Nolan’s presentation of the copula is highly involved, with numerous subtypes, which to a certain extent obscures his argument. The key point O’Nolan makes is that the copula indicates the predicate (the information given), and for this reason the subject cannot stand immediately after the copula. This is, he says, the fundamental rule that governs the syntax of the copula. O’Nolan does not say that the predicate must stand after the copula, but rather that the subject cannot, and in this respect his analysis contrasts with that of other grammars, such as Graiméar Gaeilge, where it is stated that first- and second-person pronouns can be the subjects of the copula and stand immediately thereafter. Moreover, O’Nolan denies there can be any distinction between a grammatical predicate and a logical predicate. His work was no doubt an attempt to take part in the debate of his time. For instance, in 1915 Cormac Ó Cadhlaigh had admitted some distinction between a grammatical and a logical predicate:

In this class of sentence, the pronouns of the first or second person, or the demonstratives é sin, i sin, iad san, though they may not be the logical predicate are always treated so in Irish; and therefore come immediately after the copula... in all other cases the word actually giving the information is made the predicate. [Ceart na Gaedhilge: A Treatise on Irish Syntax, p6.]

O’Nolan’s views are partly based on those of Ua Laoghaire, who strongly advanced the view that native speakers of Irish felt instinctively that the role of the copula was to highlight the information being conveyed, in other words, the predicate. Commenting on sentences like is mise Tomás, Ua Laoghaire wrote:

I can only say that, if you imagine that mise is the subject in the examples you have given, you are hopelessly wrong. In each of these examples mise contains the information. It is the English parallel that blinds you. In English the information may be put before or after the verb to be. In Irish it is essential that it should come immediately after is. The moment you appeal to English parallels I have no more to say.

The moment an Irish speaker opens his mouth and says Is mise—, all the Irish listeners who are present know that the word mise gives them a piece of information about something which is to follow. [Papers on Irish Idiom, pp69-70.]

Ua Laoghaire’s view that the copula must be followed by the predicate was not accompanied by a full working out of the possible forms, and O’Nolan’s analysis shows that the copula cannot always be followed directly by the predicate. The most basic forms of the copula of classification given by O’Nolan are as follows:

1. Is ainmhidhe capall. [p4]

2. Ainmhidhe is eadh capall. [p5]

In sentence 1 above, meaning “a horse is an animal” (where bold font will be used to show the predicate), ainmhidhe is the information, the predicate, a noun classifying what a horse is. Capall, as the subject, cannot stand directly after the copula, which instead is followed by the predicate. Where the predicate stands elsewhere in the sentence (as in 2 above), a temporary predicate or subpredicate (eadh) is inserted to hold the place of the predicate in order to prevent the copula from standing directly next to the subject, which would violate O’Nolan’s fundamental rule. If is ainmhidhe capall can be expressed as VPS, then ainmhidhe is eadh capall is PVpS (where the lower-case p is the subpredicate pronoun). Where such a sentence is part of a subordinate clause using go, gur occurs twice (in Ua Laoghaire’s Irish, at any rate):

3. Is deimhin gur ainmhidhe gurb eadh capall. [p9]
Yet not all speakers of Munster Irish today use this construction—Diarmuid Ó Sé shows in his Gaeilge Chorca Dhuibhne (p362) that sentences of the form *is dóigh liom gur punt ab ea i* are found in Corca Dhuibhne—but O’Nolan doesn’t indicate that any alternatives are possible.

O’Nolan then argues that in the copula of identification a temporary predicate has been inserted between the copula and the predicate due to analogical developments over the centuries, despite the fact that a subpredicate is not needed according to his theories, as the copula would not otherwise stand next to the subject, thus considerably complicating the syntax of the copula.

4. *Isé an saoghal so an t-earrach.* [p13, from Seanmóin is Tri Fichid, Vol 1, p54.]

(I have restored Ua Laoghaire’s spelling here and elsewhere where O’Nolan made minor orthographical amendments. In this case *isé* stands in the original, and O’Nolan quoted it as *is é.*) The meaning of this sentence is “the spring is this world” and *an saoghal so* is the predicate, and so the problem is understanding why a temporary predicate *é* is inserted, even though the copula would not otherwise stand next to the subject.

O’Nolan denies that the reason for this is that a definite noun cannot stand adjacent to the copula. The form is now VpPS, but it is argued here that the temporary predicate was often not given in such sentences in Old Irish, and that it stands there today owing to confusion of forms (p15).

5. *‘Sé is mian ris an Eaglais fearg Dé do mhaolughadh.* [p15, from An Teagasg Criostuidhe, p282.]

The meaning in this sentence from Donlevy’s catechism is “what the Church desires is to lesson the wrath of God”, a VpSP sentence where the complexity of the predicate is such that it is put at the end. O’Nolan claims that in such sentences the temporary predicate was never missing in Old Irish, because otherwise the subject, *(rud) is mian leis an Eaglais*, would have stood next to the copula, and so the fact that the temporary predicate was often missing in VpPS sentences shows, to him, that it has crept in over the centuries by analogy with VpSP and other types of sentences. O’Nolan’s understanding of the historical development of the copula was called into question by J. Vendryes in a book review in Revue Celtique in 1921 (Vol XXXVIII, 192ff). For my purposes, it is sufficient to try to understand O’Nolan’s views and evaluate their utility for learners of Muskerry Irish, without investigating the historical development further back, because O’Nolan was presenting the rules of Irish grammar for learners, rather than making a contribution to academic linguistics.

The VpSP sentences showed O’Nolan that Ua Laoghaire’s native intuition that the copula always points directly to the predicate could not be entirely correct. He therefore adopts a more judicious view, that the copula cannot be followed by the subject, but does not necessarily directly precede the predicate. The fact that he has identified both VpPS and VpSP copula of identification types means that there are sentences that could be parsed in a number of ways. For example:

6. *Isé an namhaid an peacadh.* [p27, from Seanmóin is Tri Fichid, Vol 1, p238.]

Such a sentence could mean “sin is the enemy (of man)”, but the context it was taken from shows, he says, that it means “the enemy (of man) is sin”, VpSP and not VpPS. He argues that the delivery of these sentences would be different in speech; if the meaning is “sin is the enemy (of man)”, the sentence is pronounced quickly, with the oral stress on the word *an namhaid*—as the predicate ought to receive the oral stress in all copula sentences, because the predicate is the information being conveyed—whereas, if the sentence means “the enemy (of man) is sin”, the sentence is pronounced more deliberately, *isé* [pause] *an namhaid* [pause] *an peacadh*, with oral stress on *an peacadh*. O’Nolan’s explanation of this, on pages 27 and 28 here, appears to be a key source used by Graiméar Gaeilge, where the same explanation and the same example from Ua Laoghaire’s sermons can be found on p211.
Consequently, where the copula is completely elided, the sentence may be parsed as either PS or SP. Examples given are:

7. Gormfhlaith an chéad duine a bhual uime. [p33, unsourced, but from Niamh, p172.]
8. Tir gan teanga tir gan anam. [p34; a well-known phrase for which no source is given.]

Sentence 7 means “the first person he met was Gormfhlaith”, and is therefore PS. Sentence 8 means “a land without a language is a land without a soul”, and is therefore SP. We may note in passing that O’Nolan argues (p35) that this sort of sentence is an identification of classes, and thus a copula of identification, equivalent to sé rud tir gan teanga ná tir gan anam. (Compare Graiméar Gaeilge na mBráithre Criostai, p202, where this sentence is listed as a copula of classification.)

Use of first- and second-person pronouns with the copula

This brings us to the thorny question of first- and second-person pronouns. As stated above, Ua Laoghaire strongly believed that in sentences like is mise Tomás, mise is the predicate. In later grammars, such as Graiméar Gaeilge, it is held that mise would be the predicate in a sentence of this type, whereas mé would be the subject in is mé. Ua Laoghaire was clearly unaware that later grammars would draw such a distinction based on the presence or absence of the emphatic suffix:

Whenever is is to be followed by anything definite it must always be is me, is tu, is é, is sibh, etc. Any of these pronouns coming after is must always be information. [Notes on Irish Words and Usages, p66.]

O’Nolan’s presentation agrees with Ua Laoghaire’s view that that where the copula is expressed (is mise X, is tusa X), the first- and second-person pronouns must be the predicates, because, he says, the copula cannot stand next to the subject. However, his unique contribution is to argue that where the copula is elided (mise X, tusa X), such sentences could be construed as either SP or PS sentences. The problem O’Nolan grapples with here is that, as Ó Cadhlaigh pointed out, in many such sentences, the logical predicate appears not to stand where the grammatical predicate stands. O’Nolan comments on this:

It has been maintained that in a sentence like Mise an bás in answer to the question Cia thusa? Mise must be the logical subject. With this we cannot agree, unless the sentence be understood as an example of type VI... If the verb is expressed immediately before mise then mise must be the logical predicate. It is no argument to compare such a sentence with English, and say that in the English “I” is the logical subject. This is only an attempt to bring Irish into line with English. It is sheer “anglicisation” of the language. [p36]

Type VI refers to sentences of the SP type. O’Nolan’s argument here contains an element of polemic: those who disagree with O’Nolan are accused of trying to anglicise the Irish language. A more considered attempt to explain what appears to be a distinction between logical and grammatical predicates was made by Ua Laoghaire:

In such Irish sentences as Is mise an rí, Is tusa fear an tí seo, Isé Tadhg an cléireach, etc., the words mise, tusa, the é of Isé, are the words which express the information intended to be conveyed. To say that mise, tusa, é, or any word following is in such constructions, could be the subject of the sentence, is to state what is impossible from the very nature of is.

“That is all very well when Is mise an rí is an answer to the question, Cé hé an rí? but suppose it is used as an answer to the question, Cé hé thusa? how will the case stand? e.g., Q. Cé hé thusa? A. Mise an rí. Is not mise the subject here, and is not an rí the information given?”

In answering a question a person is at liberty to omit all except the information, i.e., the thing which is not in the question, but which the question asks for. Hence, in the example
given, to the question Cé hé thusa? the answer can be simply An rí. Now, from the very essence of is in the sentence Is mise an rí, the information is in the word mise. But what sort of answer would the word Mise be to the question, Cé hé thusa?

The truth is this. The sentence Is mise an rí is not an answer to the question Cé hé thusa? It is an answer to the question Cé hé an rí? The true answer to the question Cé hé thusa? is An rí mise, or An rí. The only thing that can be said in order to justify the use of Is mise an rí as an answer to the question Cé hé thusa? is, that it conveys indirectly the information asked for, by answering, not the question Cé hé thusa? but the question Cé hé an rí? [Papers on Irish Idiom, p69.]

While it is true that the answer is mise an rí turns the sentence around, giving “the king is me” as the answer to the question “who are you?”, in Irish the preference is to phrase the answer like that. Although Ua Laoghaire here implies that *an rí mise is not absolutely grammatically incorrect, the natural idiom is to place the first- and second-person pronouns first, and he claims this means they are the predicates. It should be pointed out in passing that, according to O’Nolan’s view, given the absence of the copula, *an rí mise could be interpreted as either an SP or a PS sentence, but in any case mise an rí is the correct idiomatic form.

O’Nolan bases his presentation of Irish almost exclusively on Ua Laoghaire’s Irish, and shows with copious examples from Ua Laoghaire that where it is definitely intended that the pronoun be the subject, it is possible for these pronouns to appear correctly as the subject of the copula (with VpPS being the syntax, in line with the general form of the copula of identification). One example is:

9. Mo Dhia Thú, agus mo chuid an tsaoghal Thu. [p40, from Aithris ar Chriost, p168.]

However, O’Nolan does not give any examples where a first-person pronoun is used as the subject of the copula in Irish in a PS sentence. It is likely that such usages are rare, or possibly absent; *an rí mise was cited by Ua Laoghaire only as a sentence that would be the true answer to cé hé thusa? if the Irish did not turn the answer around, and not as an example of what should be said.

The account given in later grammars, such as Graiméar Gaeilge, draws a distinction between sentences with unstressed pronouns (mé, tú), which, it is argued, are therefore the subjects of the copula even if they stand directly after the copula, and sentences with stressed pronouns (mise, tusa), which, it is argued, are therefore the predicates, as the predicate does, after all, take the oral stress in copula sentences. This is stated explicitly on p211 (section 16.37) of that grammar (possibly ultimately based on Cormac Ó Cadhaigh’s statement in Gnás na Gaedhilge, p166, that first- and second-person pronouns come after the copula, whether the “information”—focal an eóilaí do thabhairt, which implies the logical predicate—or not). The presentation in Standard grammars therefore has the first- and second-person pronoun nearly always standing next to the copula, with the emphasis or lack of it on the pronoun, as shown by a suffix, determining whether it is the subject or the predicate of the verb. Yet it is then stated in smaller font on p212 at the end of section 16.40 of Graiméar Gaeilge that the pronoun does in fact come last in phrases like mo cheol thú and mo ghrá i sin, by way of an exception. In O’Nolan’s presentation, this would not be an exception.

O’Nolan states that the Irish preference for placing first- and second-personal pronouns in the predicate also extends to third-person pronouns fortified by a demonstrative (iad san) and also all pronouns emphasised with féin, but he argues that these may also stand in the subject, citing the following examples:

10. Maois & Elias iad san. [p40, from Na Cheithre Soisgéil, p169.]

11. ’Sí cainnt an tSlánuightheóra féin i sin. [p38, where the source is not noted. This appears to be from Seanmóin is Tri Fichid, Vol 1, p86.]
Another relevant example is Ua Laoghaire’s translation of Jesus’ words at the last supper:


O’Nolan, who edited Ua Laoghaire’s Gospels, baldly states that all other translations of this phrase are wrong, including is é seo mo chorp, which is the form used in An Biobla Naofa (the translation published by Maynooth in 1981). He argues that is é seo mo chorp would mean that Christ’s body was nowhere else but in the one consecrated host, and so on theological grounds he prefers sé mo chorp é seo (where the spelling given on p38 here is slightly revised from the published text of Na Cheithre Soisgéil). O’Nolan’s views on the matter reflected those of Ua Laoghaire in a letter the latter sent to O’Nolan dated September 1st 1913:

Ní cuimhin liom cé’cu dheineamair, nú nár dheineamair, aon chaint i dtaobh na bhfocal —‘Hoc est enim Corpus Meum’. D’fhéadfí an rádh do chur i nGaoluinn i n-a lán slighte— fêuach:—

1. Is é seo Mo Chorp-sa (.i. ní hé siúd é. Ní hé corp an duine eile é).
2. Is é seo Mo Chorp (.i. ní hé mo cheann é).
3. Is é Mo Chorp é seo (.i. ní harán é).
4. Mo Chorp é seo (.i. ní haon rud eile é).

Ní thaithneann 1. ná 2. liom i n-aon chor. Is é 4. an ceann is fearr liom, ach b’fhéidir nár mhaith le cách gan an copula bheith le feiscint ann. Bíodh do rogha agat-sa dá 3. nú dá 4. [Beatha Dhuine a Thoil, p143.]

However, it needs to be borne in mind that both Ua Laoghaire and O’Nolan were highly insistent on their views on numerous disputed aspects of Irish grammar, and is é seo mo chorp is the traditional translation of this passage of the Gospels (cf. a sé so mo chorpsa in Matthew 26:26 in Uílliam Ó Dómhaill’s New Testament of 1602 and the isé seo mo chorp-sa used by Ua Laoghaire himself in 1902 in his An Soísgéal as Leabhar an Aifrinn, p37). We may conclude that, as with mise and tusa, Irish idiom simply prefers é seo to stand in the predicate, and consequently the translation is é seo mo chorp given in An Biobla Naofa is, pace O’Nolan, not wrong, and possibly more idiomatic.

In many ways, the interpretation, in later grammars, that mise in copula sentences is the predicate and mé is the subject, provides a neat solution in terms of providing a simple explanation for learners. However, the solution appears problematic. Take, for example, the following sentence:

13. Mise cailín an Tighearna. [Criost Mac Dé, Vol 1, p19.]

O’Nolan cites this sentence and parses it as an SP sentence in his New Era Grammar (p154). This corresponds to the English “behold the handmaiden of the Lord”, or “I am the handmaiden of the Lord”; despite the emphatic suffix, the pronoun appears to be the subject here, or the logical subject at any rate. Another example I have found may illustrate this point more clearly, as the copula is given:


Here it is difficult to argue that, in view of the stressed mise, Gabriél is not the real information being conveyed, the logical predicate. So we come back to the problem that Irish seems to prefer to have the first- and second-person pronouns in the grammatical predicate.

O’Nolan could not have anticipated the significance that later grammars would give to the emphatic suffixes, but sentences 10 and 11 given above are also relevant here, as iad san and i sin stand in the subject, and so it would be difficult to posit a general rule that the subject of the copula can never take an emphatic suffix. Another example I have found is:

15. Is fior gur Tusa mo ghrádh-sa. [Aithris ar Chríost, p276.]
Here both the pronoun and the noun are stressed by means of an emphatic suffix, and so it would seem a strained interpretation to argue that the identity of the predicate should be determined here by the suffix on the pronoun (although O’Nolan would agree that *tusa* is the predicate here, simply because it stands next to the copula).

O’Nolan could possibly have pointed out that different languages do have preferences for the siting of the subject and the predicate. In English, “I am X” is much more frequently found that “X is me”, whatever the logical piece of information being conveyed, revealing a preference in English for pronouns to stand in the subject. The following example I have found illustrates this point:

> 16. Ní aithnighean sibh mé! Is mise Ióseph! An bhfuil m’athair beó? [Sgéalaidheachta as an mBiobla Naomhtha, Vol 1, p102.]

English versions of the Bible have Joseph disclosing his identity to his brothers in Egypt, after a discussion of how they had sold him into slavery, with the words “I am Joseph”. The *grammatical* predicate is *Joseph* in the English, but *mise* in the Irish (according to both O’Nolan’s presentation and that in *Graiméar Gaeilge*), but it seems the *logical* predicate—the real information being given—is *mise* in the Irish and “I” in the English, and that consequently the English sentence is anomalous in this case, standing in the place of the logical “Joseph is *me*”. It seems correct therefore to see differing preferences in the two languages in the structure of the copula, both languages having their own logic. The claim in modern grammar books that *is mé X* has *mé* as the subject of the copula therefore seems untenable.

**O’Nolan’s arguments for his views on the copula**

O’Nolan states as the fundamental rule of copula sentences that the verb cannot stand next to the subject, and in doing so rejects any “rule” that prevents definite nouns from standing next to the copula (such as that given in on p209 of *Graiméar Gaeilge*, section 16.34):

> In regard to “the rule requiring a definite noun to be separated from *is* by a personal pronoun” it is time to remark that there is NO SUCH RULE AT ALL! [p44; small capitals given in the original.]

While he accepts that a temporary predicate has crept into the copula of identification, standing between the copula and a definite predicate, he claims this results from the confusion of forms centuries ago, and adduces examples where a definite noun does in fact stand next to the copula. The examples he gives (pp44-47) are of varying cogency, including the following.

**a) Where a definite noun is used as an adverbial phrase:**

> 17. Is dócha gur an fhaid a bhí an dealbhais air a dhéin sé é. [p45, from Séadna, p117.]

Here *an fhaid* is definite (at least in form) and stands directly adjacent to the copula without a pronoun between them. Other adverbs are also definite, according to O’Nolan, e.g.

> 18. Is anois é. [p45, Na Cheithre Soisgéil, p233.]

Here *anois* may be said to refer to a definite time and yet is not separated from the copula by a pronoun. However, O’Nolan’s view that such adverbial phrases should be considered ‘definite’ in this way seems problematic, as *Graiméar Gaeilge* shows (p219, section 16.68) that *nach inniu a imeoimid?* attracts the reply *is ea*, indicating that these are copulas of classification, not identification.

**b) Definite prepositional phrases:**

> 19. Is i d’Teamhair a bhiodar an uair sin [p45; unsourced.]

O’Nolan argues that *i d’Teamhair* must be regarded as a definite phrase as we say *is é áit n-a rabhadar an uair sin* ná i d’Teamhair. However, the issue is a little more complex as *é* cannot be
used to refer to a prepositional phrase in an answer to a copula sentence, no matter how definite the reference. Compare these sentences given in an earlier passage of this work (p9):

21. An air atá sé anois? Ní headh, is fé.

The first of these appears to be of definite reference, but the response *ní headh* shows that these are copulas of classification; *é* cannot be used to answer such questions.

Clearly objections could be raised about the relevance of these examples of definite phrases placed directly next to the copula, or it could be questioned whether adverbial/prepositional phrases are really to be considered equivalent to definite-noun predicates in Irish in the sense in which O’Nolan attempted to use them.

c) Relative clauses where the copula stands next to a definite noun. A large number of examples are given:

22. *Do sgríobhadh an méid seo ionus go gcreidfeadh sibh gur b’ é Íosa is Criost Mac Dé ann.* [p45; given unsourced, but from *Na Cheithre Soisgéil*, p285.]

Here *Criost Mac Dé* stands next to the copula without a pronoun. The reason given by O’Nolan here is that the subject governing the copula here is the (unexpressed) relative particle: *gur b’ é Íosa (a) is Criost ann*. Because the relative particle is nominative to the verb here, the copula is not followed by the subject, but by the predicate, and so no subpredicate is required. Where the relative particle expresses any other case relationship, then, he argues, a subpredicate is required. For example:

23. *Cathair a chruinneóchadh mo machtnamh, go h-iomlán, ionat-sa, i dtreó... ná mothóchadh mé féin i n-aon chor, ach Tusa amhán, ar chuma nách é gach aoinne a thuigeann?* [p46, from *Aithris ar Chríost*, p141.]

As *ar chuma nách é gach aoinne a thuigeann* means “in a way that not everyone understands”, the negative relative is in an accusative relationship, *(an té) a thuigeann* is the subject and *gach aoinne* is the predicate, and so cannot stand next to the copula without a subpredicate pronoun.

24. *Ní l’aoinne ó bhaoghal ag teacht os cómhacht daoine ach an t-é gur b’ é a dhúil bheithe i n’aonar.* [p45, from *Aithris ar Chríost*, p36.]

Here the relative is in a genitive relationship (expressing “whose”), and a pronoun is required.

25. *Tabharfar duit solus aigne agus eolus, chómh fada agus is é do leas é.* [pp46-47, from *Aithris ar Chríost*, p287.]

Here the (unexpressed) relative particle is in a dative relationship, as is required in temporal clauses (“the length of time in which”, although the extended meaning here is “as far as”), and so a pronoun is required.


Here the (unexpressed) relative particle is also in a dative relationship, as required in modal clauses (“the way in which”), and so a pronoun is required.

O’Nolan argues that the only time a pronoun is not required in such relative clauses is where the relative particle (whether expressed or implied) governs the following copula as its subject, in which case the subject does not succeed the copula and so no subpredicate is required to keep the subject separate from the copula. Yet he then quotes a sentence from Ua Laoghaire where a negative
relative clause governs a succeeding copula as its subject and yet a pronoun is inserted before the following predicate:

27. Bhí a lán neithe nár bh’ é an lá ar áileacht againn. [p47, from Sgothbhuaidh, p135.]

O’Nolan attempts to explain this by surmising that it reflects the influence of the common phrases rud nach é and rud nárbh é, reflecting a general concern throughout Studies in Modern Irish to produce analogical explanations or explanations based on syntactical contamination between similar phrases to explain in a neat fashion all the grammatical forms found in Ua Laoghaire’s works.

Nevertheless, the example is interesting, as, if O’Nolan’s presentation is correct, a good opportunity to place the definite article directly next to the copula was ‘missed’ by Ua Laoghaire here, and he is required to resort to contamination by analogy with other phrases to explain this. I have found numerous examples where a copula is followed by a definite predicate in Ua Laoghaire’s works, but none where the definite article itself is given. For example:

28. Déanfimid, d’á bhrígh sin, réir an Tighearna, óir isé an Tighearna is Dia againn. [Sgéalaideachta as an mBíobla Naomhtha, Vol 3, p259.]


In all of these cases, while the noun is definite by implication, the definite article is not to be seen, and O’Nolan may have been on firmer ground had he further refined his theory to state that, owing to the influence of the use of the subpredicate in other copula sentences between the copula and a definite subject, it seems the definite article would be avoided between the copula and a definite predicate too.

**Interrogative predicates**

O’Nolan claims (p48) that in questions like cad is ainm duit?, where it seems as if a subject ainm duit comes next to the verb, the sentence is to be understood as elliptical. The subject is really (an ainm is) ainm duit and cad? the predicate (or an interrogative pronoun standing for the predicate), and consequently the subject of the is that is expressed in the sentence is the unexpressed relative particle in the elliptical phrase. This interpretation allows him to maintain that his fundamental rule of the copula, that the copula cannot stand next to the subject, is not violated in questions. Where a pronoun intervenes in questions like cad é an rud é sin?, cad is the predicate, the verb is understood and é is a subsubject (see p50) proleptically anticipating the subject an rud é sin (PsS, where the lower-case s stands for the subsubject). A similar explanation is given in New Era Grammar (p156), where it is argued that in cia hé an fear é sin? the form is PsS, with the intervention of a subsubject.

**Copula types not covered by O’Nolan**

O’Nolan’s analysis of the copula finishes here, but his theory of the copula could be applied to interrogative sentences of the following type:

30. Ní fheidir do rígh Alban ná d’aoinne eile aon eólus a thabhairt d’aoinne orainn an fhaid ná beidh ‘fhios aige cé hiad sinn. [Lughaidh Mac Con, p28.]

This sentence type is similar to cia hé an fear é sin?, but a little more confusing, given the coincidence of a third-person pronoun with a first-person pronoun in cé hiad sinn? According to O’Nolan’s presentation of the copula, iad must be a subsubject here, and the form is also PsS.

Both O’Nolan and other teaching grammars fail to offer a parsing of sentences of the type seo rud and sin é an capall. They are mentioned on p218 (paragraph 16.65 of Graiméar Gaeilge), but the presentation there does not go into any detail on their parsing. It seems seo and sin are fused forms that incorporate the copula, something that is a little clearer from the past-tense forms of such sentences (b’shin rud, etc). Consequently, if O’Nolan’s presentation is correct, seo (and sin, sid, siúd, as the case may be) must be the predicates, and the é in the definite form of this sentence must
be a subsubject (PsS, or VPsS if it considered that sin contains the copula fused with a demonstrative).

Sentences like sin é ansan é seem elliptical for sin é (an rud atá) ansan (agat) é, but can basically be parsed in a straightforward fashion according to O’Nolan’s theory of the copula. But where does this leave sentences of the sin é é variety? Sin é and sid é may have become partly reinterpreted as exclamatory expressions fully analogous to the French voilà and voici, but nevertheless a subsubject é is found here directly adjacent to a subject é. Just as in cad é an rud é sin? a subsubject intervenes before the subject, an rud é sin, it seems a subsubject is required in sentences of the sin é type, even where the subject is itself é. I have also found a couple of examples in Ua Laoghaire’s works where the subsubject introduces a first-person pronoun subject

31. Siné mé anso i lár do phoibul thoghtha féin. [Sgéalaídeachta as an mBiobla Naomhtha, Volume 4, p478.]

32. B shiné mise agus mé bodhar ó bheith ag éisteacht leat-sa ag caimint. [Cómhairle ár leasa, p81.]

It seems learners of Muskerry Irish have been confused by these sin é é-type copula sentences, as, each time that Ua Laoghaire wrote sin é!—an exclamation expressing satisfaction or acceptance of something (“there you go! that’s that then!”), with no subsubject given—in Séadna, Shán Ó Cuív chose to transcribe that in his letiriú shímplí edition, Shiána, as shin é é! (compare Séadna, p19, and Shiána, p10). It seems there is a clear distinction in Ua Laoghaire’s works between sin é and sin é é. Sin é is an exclamation, whereas sin é é (sin é go direach é, sin é agat é, etc) is a standard copula sentence identifying two things (“it is him, it is that, that is it, that is exactly what it is!”, etc).

Finally, O’Nolan does not discuss copula of identification sentences of the is é é type, found rarely in Ua Laoghaire’s work, like the following:

33. Íosa, Mac Ióseph ó Nasaret, isé é. [Criost Mac Dé, Vol 1, p106.]

New Era Grammar (pp153-154) does list a copula of identification of the form PVpS (citing an bhean chos-nochtaithe isí a bhí ann from Séadna, p248), analogous to copula of classification sentences of the form ainmhidhe is eadh capall where the material predicate goes first, but we can also bring in comparison two copula types discussed by O’Nolan where the material subject goes first:

34. An teagasg so a thugaim-se ní liom é. [p7, from Na Cheithre Soisgéil, p245.]

35. An t-arán a thabharfad-sa uaim isé mo chuid feóla féin é chun beatha an domhain. [p41, from Na Cheithre Soisgéil, p242.]

The first of these is a copula of classification of the form SVPs, as O’Nolan argues prepositional phrases such as liom used in the predicate are indefinite (equivalent to rud liom). The material subject comes first, and a subsubject refers back to it. The second of these is a copula of identification of the form SVpPs. Clearly, both the predicate and the subject can be extracted and given first either due to their complexity or for emphasis, being referred back to by a temporary pronoun. This leaves it a moot point whether Íosa, Mac Ióseph ó Nasaret, isé é is PVpS or SVPs, although the context in Criost Mac Dé would point to the former.

The section on the copula is by far the most difficult in O’Nolan’s book. The reader is left with the impression that O’Nolan has dissected the copula in great detail and may be correct in his fundamental theories, but that the analogical developments that have altered the copula construction over the centuries mean that any presentation—including both his and that of Graiméar Gaeilge—has to be supplemented with a list of exceptions, making it unclear that his presentation is superior in terms of utility to the learner of Muskerry Irish than that given in Graiméar Gaeilge.
2. The Syntax of Relative Clauses

As with the copula, relative clauses are the subject of O’Nolan’s typical forensic-style analysis, producing a detailed list of exceptions to the use of direct/indirect relative clauses that many grammar books (whether grammar books aimed at learners or detailed reference works) have not covered in the same way.

The key issue with relative clauses is when to use a direct and when to use an indirect construction. The general rule may be stated simply that when the case relationship expressed is oblique, the indirect relative is required; yet there are many instances where this does not hold. It is possibly easier for a learner to learn the complex rules relating to relative clauses on the hoof, by absorbing real Irish, than by memorising a list of exceptions, but O’Nolan’s presentation is interesting, nonetheless.

Temporal and modal clauses

In temporal clauses, the indirect relative would be logical (“time at which/in which”, which is a dative construction), and this is the case in phrases such as um an dtaca go raibh sé and le linn na haimsire ’na raibh sé, but exceptions are numerous, including the use of the direct relative after nuair, an fhaid and time phrases like the following:

36. Bhí anaim Thaidhg i n-aírde le méid a níirt ó’n lá úd a ghabh sé ar an móirsheisear a lean ó Sráid an Mhuilinn é chun a mharbhtha. [p89, from Seadna, p38].

O’Nolan later suggests in New Era Grammar (p137) that phrases like an fhaid are used with the direct relative because they are ‘accusatives of extent in time’.

Modal clauses (pp90-91) should also be indirect (“the way in which” is logically dative), but phrases like mar a bhí contain an irregular use of the direct relative (contrasting with mar a raibh, which means something different), and the use of conus with the direct relative in Munster Irish is also an exception to the general rule (compare cad é an chuma?, which takes the indirect relative).

Comparatives (p92) in sentences like is fearr is eol dómh-sa é ná mar is éól dhuit-se é express a modal meaning too, but are followed by the direct relative. These are single relative clauses; see below for O’Nolan’s further discussion of comparatives in nested multiple relative constructions.

With proleptic particles

Clauses with a proleptic a or dá, meaning “however”, are found with the direct relative:

37. Bhí iongna a gcroidhe ortha a fheabhas do dheineadar an gnó. [p91, slightly amended from Sèadna, p183.]

Here a fheabhas do dheineadar é means “the goodness with which they did it”.

Similarly, a proleptic de is also irregularly followed by the direct relative:

38. B’fhéidir gur déine-de a déanfar an guidhe an teachtairacht do chur tímpal uait-se. [p91, from Niamh, p225.]

Here the ‘second comparative’ (a comparative in -de meaning “all the more X”) déine-de includes a proleptic de and is followed by a déanfar in a sense that is equivalent to an chuma ’na ndéanfar.

Other exceptions

Amhlaidh (pp80-81) takes the direct relative: is amhlaidh a dhein sé. Emphatic sentences (p91) such as is liom-sa a bhaineann an chainnt sin also contain relatives that do not express a nominative/accusative relationship and so may therefore also be regarded as irregular uses of the direct relative. In the following sentence,
39. *Cad důbháirt Ospac a bhi Bruadar ar aigne dhéanamh?* [p92, from *Niamh*, p258.]

O’Nolan claims that *(a) dhéanamh* refers obliquely to *cad [é an rud]*, and so the construction is essentially genitive, and yet a direct relative is employed. He doesn’t mention that this usage is likely to be influenced by *rud a dhéanamh* (where the verbal noun is governed by *a* or *do* in a usage that O’Nolan describes as ‘dative’ on p135).

**Indirect relatives in virtual genitive constructions**

Conversely, a whole class of apparent exceptions, where the indirect relative is unexpectedly found, is identified by O’Nolan as resolvable by comparison with genitive phrases. For example:

40. *Na h-oibreacha gur thug m’Athair dom iad le déanamh… tugaid siad fiadhnaise am’ thaobh gur b’è an t-Athair a chuir uaidh mé.* [p102, from *Na Cheithre Soisgéil*, p237.]

Here we find an indirect relative phrase. O’Nolan points out that *iad le déanamh* here could be rephrased as *a ndéanamh*, and so the construction is virtually genitive, and thus indirect. Another example adduced is:

41. *An t-aimhleas n-a mbéadh duine acu lán cheapaithe ar é dhéanamh* [p105, from *Niamh*, p95.]

This is virtually genitive, he says, because *é dhéanamh* can be replaced by *a dhéanamh*.

There are many sentences where adding in an unexpressed ‘*na thaobh* brings out a virtual genitive relationship:

42. *Íosa éigin a fuair bás agus go raibh Pól ’ghá rádh é bheith beó.* [p105, quoted unsourced, but from *Gníomhartha na n-Aspol*, p361.]

An unexpressed ‘*na thaobh* can be supplied after ‘*ghá rádh* to explain why *go raibh* is employed here, as well as the reinforcing cross-influence of the use of *go raibh* in subordinate (non-relative) clauses in other sentences.

**The ambiguity of go and ná**

Some of these sentences can be parsed in more than one way owing to the fact that *go* is a conjunction in subordinate clauses as well as an indirect relative particle. For example:

43. *Is aoibhinn do’n té go dtabharfai-se teagasc dó, & go múinfir as do dhlighe é.* [p108, unsourced; this appears to be from Ua Laoghaire’s unpublished translation of Psalm 93:12.]

This could be the conjunction *go* with ellipsis of *a rá* after the ampersand, or you could parse it as a relative particle used with an accusative relationship (i.e., one that should be a direct relative) under influence of the earlier indirect relative in the first clause.

44. *Cá bhfuil an seómra bídh go n-ithead an cáisg i bhfochair mo dheisgiobul?* [p110, from *Na Cheithre Soisgéil*, p210.]

O’Nolan argues here that *go* appears to be a conjunction used with the subjunctive, but by supplying an additional unexpressed *ann* it would become relative.

45. *Feuchaint an bhfaghadh sé aon rud go bhfèadfaidh sé greim a bhreith air.* [p110, from *Eisirt*, p42.]

O’Nolan argues that this *go* could either be a conjunction, with the clause meaning “that he might take hold of it”, or a relative particle, with the clause meaning “that he might take hold of it”.

Negative relatives (*ná, nach and nár*) present an additional difficulty in that, unlike their affirmative equivalents, no distinction between direct and indirect relative relationships is made. An example
of a clear direct relative is *sin rud ná raibh ann* le’m linn-se. However, many such sentences can either be understood to express either a nominative/accusative or a genitive relationship:

46. *Ar ball do theastóchadh rud éigin uatha nár bh’fhéidir a dh’fhághail.* [p134, from Guaire, Vol 1, p3.]

If the *a dh’* is understood to be a reduplicated particle governing the verbal noun, then the relationship is nominative, and thus direct relative. If *a dh’* is understood to be the possessive particle padded out phonetically by *dh*’ then the relationship is genitive, and thus indirect relative.

**Multiple nested relatives**

O’Nolan claims (p114) to have been the first person to have noticed the double relative construction, and if so, his contribution remains palpable, if unacknowledged, in later grammars. He gives as an example:

47. *Cia is dóigh leat do scriobh an leitir?* [p114, possibly based on *cé is dóích leat a sgríbh i?* in *Niamh*, p147.]

This fuses together two separate relative sentences:

*Cia (hè an té) is dóigh leat?*

*Cia (hè an té) do scriobh an leitir?

O’Nolan’s presentation of the multiple relative sentence is centred around his assertion that *multiple relative clauses have a direct relative in the first relative clause*. He states this explicitly on pages 133 and 134 of this work, claiming that where an indirect relative is found in the first clause it is either the product of inversion, where an indirect relative in one of the later nested relative clauses is shifted to the first clause, or is ‘abnormal’ usage. O’Nolan therefore appeared to believe that Irish does not have a double indirect relative, or only has such in ‘abnormal’ sentences. We may contrast the usage shown in *Learning Irish* (p83), Micheál Ó Siadhail’s textbook of dialectal Cois Fhairrge Irish, where double indirect relatives are permitted of the type *an bhfuil an leabhar ar an mbord a sílim a bhfuil sé air?* The assertion that the multiple relative sentence is fundamentally direct, or direct in the first clause, appears questionable, or overly assertive, in the light of O’Nolan’s marshalling of exceptions to this (either by inversion or ‘abnormal’ usage). It may be, however, that the nesting of multiple relative clauses would become unwieldy if there were frequent shifts in the syntactical pattern in what he shows could be a concatenation of four or five relatives, and so in practice the patterns O’Nolan identified may be the most frequent.

By “inversion”, O’Nolan means that the fusing of two separate relative sentences where one is indirect often requires the transposing of the indirect relative to the first clause, particularly where an *is dóigh* clause, *an chuma* or a comprehensive relative clause stand early in the sentence. This is generally the case where a temporal or locative clause is the second element in the double relative, which would otherwise call for an indirect relative later in the sentence, but which would thereby have rendered the multiple relative sentence overly complex. For example:

48. *Ag breithniughadh na h-aimsire ’n-ar dhóich leó a bhéadh an t-Árdigh ag teacht.* [p90, from *Niamh*, p210.]

O’Nolan explains that this contains two nested relative clauses:

*na h-aimsire ba dhóich leó* (direct relative)

*na h-aimsire ’n-a mbéadh sé ag teacht* (temporal indirect relative)

Yet the fused double relative sentence transfers the indirect relative to the earlier *dóigh* clause.

A similar situation obtains with the shifting forward of a locative indirect relative phrase. The following example is given:
49. 

O’Nolan notes that *san áit a gheóbhainn é* has the direct relative, whereas as a separate clause not nested in a double relative construction this would be quite wrong, as *san áit* would require the indirect relative. If we said *san áit do mheasas ná faighinn é*, it would be quite normal, but when the negative relative is shifted by a process of inversion to the first relative clause, the direct relative of that clause is then shifted to the second clause.

50. 

In this example we have a similar fusion of two relative sentences:

Tógfar uaidh gach a measann sé.
Tógfar uaidh gach a bhfuil aige.

As *gach a measann sé* already incorporates an indirect relative (the comprehensive relative particle), it is followed by *atá aige*, even though the separate sentences nested in this double relative sentence show that *gach a bhfuil aige* with an indirect relative has been subsumed.

Similarly, O’Nolan shows (pp125-127) how a quintuple relative sentence can see a shifting of the indirect relative from the fifth to the first clause. The following five nested relative clauses produce a sentence meaning “in what way do you think he said they thought things would work out to their benefit?”:

1. *Cad é an chuma is dóigh leat?*
2. *Cad é an chuma adubhairt sé?*
3. *Cad é an chuma do mheasadar?*
4. *Cad é an chuma ab’ fhearr?*
5. *Cad é an chuma n-a raghadh an sgéal i dtairbhe dhóibh?*

By transferring the indirect relative clause of the fifth clause to the first nested question, the final sentence then becomes *cad é an chuma n-ar dóich leat adubhairt sé do mheasadar ab’ fhearr a raghadh an sgéal i dtairbhe dhóibh?* Interestingly, O’Nolan does not give a source to show attestation of such a complex relative sentence, and it seems likely that quadruple and quintuple relative sentences are not frequently found in speech. The best thing that can said about this sentence, and similar examples given in *New Era Grammar* (p143), is that this is how such sentences might be worded if they were ever needed.

O’Nolan therefore shows that multiple relative sentences generally have a direct relative in the first clause, or an indirect relative in the first clause transposed from a subsequent nested relative clause, probably to avoid syntactical clutter. However, O’Nolan then notes that there are ‘abnormal’ examples where an indirect relative is transposed to the first relative clause, and yet the succeeding temporal or locative clause retains the indirect relative too:

51. 

This an example where *chun gach tíre ba dóich léi* becomes indirect relative, and yet we still have a *go* clause afterwards. Another way of parsing this (p132) would be to say that the first clause is incomplete and *go* is a subordinating conjunction to complete the sense.

O’Nolan does not consider here whether there might be sentences where it is better that the indirect relative be retained in the second clause, but Micheál Ó Siadhail’s *an bhfuil an leabhar ar an mbord a sílim a bhfuil sé air?* seems quite similar to the following double relative usage in Ua Laoghaire’s works:
In reality, there appears to be a certain degree of looseness in Irish syntax in relative clauses, possibly owing to the parallel use of go to introduce non-relative clauses, and so the assertion that double indirect relatives are ‘abnormal’ overstates O’Nolan’s case. Interestingly, Cormac Ó Cadhlaigh, another grammarian who almost entirely bases his presentation of grammar on Ua Laoghaire’s Irish, eschews O’Nolan’s assertiveness over the abnormality of the double indirect relative, merely stating, with respect to sentences like aon tsaghas ruda gur dóich leó go bhfuil ainim na galántachta air:

Ins na solúidibh seo, is amhlaidh chuidh dál an fhochlásail ar deire i bhfeidhm ar an abairt ar lár istigh. [Gnás na Gaedhilge, p407.]

Comparatives in multiple relative clauses

We referred above to single relative clauses with comparatives (is fearr is eol dómh-sa é), but where the comparative is itself part of a relative clause in a multiple relative construction the second clause (the clause governed by the comparative) is indirect where the relationship is oblique. For example, O’Nolan adduces:

53. Nil éinne is fearr gurb eol dó é ná mar is eol dómh-sa é. [p92; this sentence was possibly based by O’Nolan on níl aoinne is fearr gurb bh’eól dó san ná mar dob eól duit-se é in Táin Bó Cuailgne, p1.]

The reason for the apparent irregularity was clarified in New Era Grammar (p138), where O’Nolan points out that in sentences of the is fearr is eol dómh-sa é type, the subject of the first is is the phrase is eol dómh-sa é, whereas in nil éinne is fearr gurb eol dó é, the subject of the first is is an unexpressed relative particle following éinne and gurb eol dó é connects, not with fearr, but with éinne. Another example given is:

54. Tá i n-easnamh fós air an nídh is mó n-a bhfuil gádh aige leis. [p92, from Aithris ar Chríost, p85.]

An exception in turn to the use of an indirect relative in the clause governed by the comparative is where the dative clause precedes:

55. Is dómh-sa is fearr is eol cá luigheann an bhróg orm. [p92, possibly based on sentences like is dócha gur agat-sa is fearr atá a fhios san in Séadna, p261.]

An exception to the exception is where the dative clause is part of an interrogative clause:

56. Bhiodh an formad ann, leis, feuchaint cé aige dob’fhhearr n-a mbéadh an t-ollmhúchán déanta. [p92, from Niamh, p180.]

The explanation is rounded out in New Irish Grammar (pp138-139): in is dómh-sa is fearr is eol é, we have a complex elliptical sentence (where the copula is used to extract and highlight a prepositional phrase), and such sentences require the direct relative. A further example of this point about complex elliptical clauses is this:

57. Ní de a déanfí rígh-ollamh. [New Irish Grammar, p139, from Guaire, Vol 1, p23.]

Here the complex ellipsis requires the direct relative (compare an té go ndéanfí righ-ollamh de where no ellipsis is used), and a similar ellipsis is found in is dómh-sa is fearr is eol é. By contrast, in cé aige dob’fhhearr é the prepositional phrase is merely transferred forward, without a complex ellipsis with the copula. Such complex rules seem to have been generated to explain the usage O’Nolan found in Ua Laoghaire’s works, but in any case guidance on such detailed matters is hard for learners of Irish to find elsewhere.
Interrogative double relatives

Finally, interrogative sentences often contain double relatives, and if they do the first clause will be direct relative and the second clause direct or indirect relative, depending on whether an oblique relationship is implied. Let us first take the example of *cathoin* (O’Nolan’s spelling of *cathain*), a temporal adverb that illogically requires the direct relative.

58. *Cathoin adbhairt sć go mbeadh sć ann?* [p139]
59. *Cathoin adbhairt sć a bheadh sć ann?* [p139]

In sentence 58, the *go* clause is simply a subordinate clause in a sentence with a single relative (“when did he make the statement that he was going to be there?”). In sentence 59, by contrast, we have the double relative: “when did he say he would be there?” There is no oblique relationship here, and the second clause is direct relative.

60. *Cad chuige go ndubhairt sć ná raibh aon mhaith innti?* [p139]
61. *Cad chuige adbhairt sć ná raibh aon mhaith innti?* [p139]

Sentence 60 is an elliptical form of *cad é an rud go ndubhairt sć ná raibh aon mhaith innti chuige?*, and *cad chuige* is generally followed by a subordinate clause with *go*. This is a single relative sentence meaning “why did she say she was no good at it?” If we intend a double relative, then, according to O’Nolan’s rule on double relatives other than of an abnormal type, the first clause must contain a direct relative, as in sentence 61 (“what did she say she was no good at?”)

Difficulties in parsing double relative constructions

Abnormalities in and difficulties in parsing multiple relative constructions largely relate to difficulties in the ambiguous use of *go* and *ná* as both subordinating conjunctions and relative particles, similar to the ambiguities found with these in single relative constructions.

62. *An t-é a deir sibh-se gur b’é bhúr nDia é.* [p128, from *Na Cheithre Soisgéil*, p251.]

This sentence means “he whom you say is your God”. O’Nolan previously stated that where the relative particle governs the copula as its subject no subpredicate is needed before a definite noun predicate, but here he says the *gur* clause is used “to avoid the somewhat unusual *is bhúr nDia* (with omission of pronoun)”. He argues that this sentence is equivalent to a genitive relationship (“he of whom you say”), although the preference of the double relative for the direct relative in the first clause does not permit a genitive relationship in the first clause without the intervention of another phrase that is then naturally followed by a subordinate clause rather than a nested relative clause (*an té ’nar dhóigh libh ’na thaobh go...*), and so a subordinate clause replaces what would have been the nested double relative.

63. *Buart nár mheasas riamh gur bh’fhéidir a leithéid do theacht ar mhnaoi.* [p129, from *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, p133.]

Here it is unclear how *nár* and *gurbh* should be parsed. In his discussion O’Nolan points out that *gurbh* appears to be a genitive relative (“sorrow the like of which”), but if *nár* is parsed as a conjunction, *gurbh* must also be a conjunction, as there can be no double relative in that case. Alternatively, *nár* may be a genitive relative (a truncation of *nár mheasas riamh ’na thaobh*), but then *gurbh* is still a conjunction, as a genitive relationship in the first clause violates O’Nolan’s rule that the first clause of a double relative must contain a direct relative, and would therefore be followed by a subordinate clause and not a relative clause.

64. *Rud ba dhóich le h-aoinne nár bh’fhéidir a dh’fhághail.* [p129, from *Guaire*, Vol 1, p63.]

Here we see that *ba* is direct relative and *nár* is also a relative here (a genitival relative linking up with *a dh’fhághail*), and so this is a double relative sentence. But once you say *rud gur dhóich le h-*
aoinne nár bh’fhéidir a dh’fhághail, you no longer have a double relative sentence. This is because gur in the first clause is indirect relative (in a genitival relationship implying gur dhóich le h-aoinne ‘na thaobh), and so there is no double relative here and the nár must be parsed as a conjunction. Alternatively, if it is accepted that double indirect relatives are permitted in Irish, whether ‘abnormal’ or not, then both the gur and the nár may be parsed as relative here.

**Nuances created by relative clauses**

It can be seen, therefore, that O’Nolan insists on an intricate parsing of each word in the sentence, identifying go as either the subordinating conjunction or the relative particle wherever it occurs, complicated by the fact that the historical development of the particle shows that these two uses have cross-influenced and reinforced each other.

This analysis of relative clauses easily becomes abstruse, but O’Nolan argues that the use or non-use of the double relative makes for great subtlety in Ua Laoghaire’s Irish, possibly creating nuances that a less careful reader might miss. For example:

65. *Bímid go minic ag gáirí nuair ba cheart gur ag gol a bheimis.* [p133, from *Aithris ar Chríost*, p40.]

This is not double relative, and the meaning of nuair is rather “whereas”—“we often laugh, whereas in all reason we ought to weep”, creating a contrast between laughing and crying. If the stress were upon our laughing at the very time we ought to be crying, then O’Nolan shows the double relative would be called for in the following form: *bímid go minic ag gáirí an uair ba cheart a bhéimis ag gol.*

**3. Ellipsis and Syntactical Contamination**

*Studies in Modern Irish* is unusual in the attention given to Irish sentence structures that can only be parsed by assuming some words have dropped out of the sentence. I haven’t found a similar detailed treatment of ellipsis elsewhere in a way that would aid learners of Irish.

66. *Níor fhánas i n-aon bhall ach dul abhaile láithreach.* [p193, from *Séadna*, p42.]

This is an example of a sentence that begins with the finite verb and then suddenly changes construction with the verbal noun. O’Nolan argues that the sentence can be understood as meaning *níor fhánas i n-aon bhall ach [is é dheineas] dul abhaile láithreach.*

Change of construction as a result of ellipsis generally occurs in negative clauses, either adversative introduced by ach, or non-adversative introduced by agus. These are illustrated as follows:

67. *Níor leig sé aon nídh air, ach an biadh do chaitheamh.* [p193, from *Séadna*, p68.]

68. *Cad ’na thaobh ná preaban tú láithreach agus i do leanmhaint?* [p194, from *Séadna*, p164.]

The first of these assumes an unexpressed *[is amhlaidh a dhein sé]*. The second may be rewritten with … agus [ná deineann tú] i do leanmhaint?

Other instances of ellipsis occur with má, dá and nuair, particularly in sentences introducing unexpected, undesired or heterogeneous events. The following example is given:


In this sentence, after agus we may supply an unexpressed má ráníghéann (or más rud).

70. *Tá súil agam go dtuillfidh Micheál an t-airgead chómh macánta agus dá mba ná béadh sé fághalta roimh ré aige.* [p208, from *Séadna*, p67.]

71. *Táim réidh anois murab ionan a’s riamh.* [p202, from *Séadna*, p22.]
72. Is maith an buachaill tú. [p4]

In sentence 70, O’Nolan understands after *agus* an unexpressed *do thuillfeadh sé e*. He argues 71 is elliptical as the word “now” needs to be supplied to complete the sense (*murab ionann fanois* is *riamh*, “unless now and any other time are the same”). Copula sentences like 72 are also elliptical, as the subject of the copula (*an buachaill tú*) appears to contain an unexpressed relative clause (“the boy that you are”).

73. Ní lágha ’ná mar a bhionn aon fhormad aige le h-aoinne. [p204, from Aithris ar Chríost, p26.]

O’Nolan claims that sentences with *ní lugha ná (mar a)* are confusing to learners (and grammatical parsers), as the English has something like “neither does...” There is no comparative in the English. He suggests expanding this sentence as *ní lugha a bhionn aoinnidh eile uaidh, ná mar a bhionn aon fhormad aige le h-aoinne*.

74. Ná glac sásamh mar gheall ar t’éirim aigne... le h-eagla go gcurfá mi-shásamh ar Dhia, agus gur b’è Dí a thug duit pé deagthréithe atá ionat. [p207, from Aithris ar Chríost, p12.]

Many uses of *agus go* are elliptical, such as sentence 74 here, and appear to contain an unexpressed *a rá* after the *agus*. Or, he says, you could regard *agus go* as just meaning “whereas”. *Agus a rá* may also be elliptical. In sentence 75, it could be read as *agus is fior a rá*.

76. Is minic gur i lár na h-oídhche a thagadh ola

77. Is minic go dtagann ceann-fé orm féin. [p211, from Aithris ar Chríost, p277.]

O’Nolan states that *is minic* is followed by a direct relative clause, and that sentence 76 is based on an underlying *is minic a thagadh an glaodhaoch ola*. When the copula is used to emphasise one part of the sentence, *go* intervenes, as above. Only the copula is emphasised with *go* in this way. However, he then says that there are occasional sentences, such as sentence 77, that appear to have verbs other than the copula used with *is minic go*, but O’Nolan understands them to be elliptical, in this case standing for *is minic a ránigheann go dtagann ceann-fé orm féin*. Otherwise is *minic a thagann* would be expected.

These explanations, using ellipsis to generate *ad hoc* justifications in a rather creative manner to explain the syntax found in Ua Laoghaire’s works, may sometimes simply be O’Nolan’s way of imposing regularity on a dialect that has some syntactical leeway. If is *minic go dtagann ceann-fé* orm contains an omitted *a ránigheann*, then it would seem that *is minic* could always be followed by *go*, as *a ránigheann* or variations thereof could be inserted or inferred in any sentence.

**Contamination**

Numerous examples are found in native Irish of sentences that appear to be difficult to parse in a logical manner owing to the effect of contamination or analogical developments. The use of *cad* to mean “why?” is problematic:

78. Cad ba ghádh a leithéid a chur ann? [p198]

This sentence means “why is it necessary to send such a person/thing there?” To fully write out the meaning, it would be *cad é an rud gur ghádh a leithéid a chur ann mar gheall air*. But as O’Nolan points out, to say that *cad* may be used adverbially doesn’t explain the construction. He lists five
possibilities, including that this usage is influenced by the grammatically regular equivalent cad fé [ndeáir] a leithéid a chur ann?

79. Ní l leigheas ar an meathalú' ach muíntir na h-Éirean do dhul agus eólus a chur ar a gcaint féin airís. [p200, from Sgothbhualadh, p84.]

A change of construction is also found here, as do dhul and eólus a chur are different constructions (we don’t have do chur eóluis, for example). The blended form can be said to reflect the influence of ach go ndéanfadh muíntir na hÉireann dul agus eólus a chur (O’Nolan’s spelling of muíntir differs from that in Sgothbhualadh).

The details of some examples of contamination appear so intricate they may be unnoticed by the casual reader. For example:

80. Mharbhuighdar an uile rud i bhfuirm duine de shlocht Gaodhal d’ár fhéadadar teacht suas leis. [p199, from Sgothbhualadh, p54.]

Here the problem is the use of d’ár with leis. An uile dhuine de makes perfect sense: you can say mharbhuighdar an uile dhuine d’ár fhéadadar, where d’ár is the comprehensive relative (analogous to gach fear dá raibh ann), but the writer here is clearly influenced by an indirect relative sentence with gur... leis, namely, mharbhuighdar an uile dhuine gur fhéadadar teacht suas leis. By combining the two, we end up with d’ár... leis. This therefore combines both the comprehensive and indirect relatives.

81. Má chaithean tú gach Adbhent d’á bhfágfar ar an saoghal so thú. [p199, from Seanmóin is Trí Fichid, Vol 1, p4.]

This sentence reflects contamination between d’á bhfágfar ar an saoghal so agat and go bhfágfar ar an saoghal so thú due to the need to follow up gach with de.

The use of ná in copula sentences is also the product of historical contamination:

82. Sé rud is fearr dhuit a dhéanamh ná dul a choladh dhuit féin. [p200, without attribution.]

O’Nolan says that this reflects the underlying sentences sé rud is fearra dhuit a dhéanamh, and níor bhfhearr dhuit rud a dhéanfá ná... .

The use of a superfluous agus can be similarly explained: a fheabhas is do dhein sé an gnó is explained (p201) as reflecting contamination of chómh maith is do dhein é and a fheabhas do dhein sé é.

Sometimes a change in word order has produced an apparent syntactical anomaly. Do dheineadar breis is a ndóthain (p201) derives from an original do dheineadar a ndóthain & breis. Is ionann agus bás an bheatha so (p202) derives from an original is ionann an bheatha so & bás, but the agus is now reinterpreted as meaning “as” once the word order has been switched around.

Ní fiù biorán is é (p203) appears to mean “it and a pin are not worth much”, yet the meaning is “it is not worth a pin”. The construction may derive from analogy with is ionann biorán is é. In is cuma nó muc duine gan seif (p201), cuma nó is now seen to mean “the same as”, but it results, he says, from an original phrase along the lines of is cuma duine gan seif nó muc. Cumá was once the predicate, but nó muc is now part of the predicate too. O’Nolan believes an dá là is an fhaid a mhairfidh sé can be understood as a reference to the day the thing in question began and the day of the man’s death (p203).

Ní fuláir nó is also problematic (p205). Ní fuláir nó tá tuirse ort tréis an turús is based on an underlying ní fuláir gur duine ana látair thu nó tá tuirse ort, “you must be a strong man or else you are tired”. The influence of this form has also led to ní fuláir nó go bhfuil tuirse ort. Nó go in the meaning of “until” (p207) may have arisen in the same way as ní fuláir nó. For example, a sentence

19
could originally have been *dubháirt sé go bhfanfadh sé ann go bhfaghadh sé bás, nó go dtiochtadh duine éigin chun é fhuaistgilt*. Then once the first go clause is omitted it becomes *go bhfanfadh sé ann nó go*...

An illogicality that can be understood by syntactical contamination is the following sentence given in *New Era Grammar* (p205):

> 83. *Ní l aoinne is fearr go bhfuil a fhios san aige 'ná aige féin.* [From Criost Mac Dé, Vol 2, p309.]

It would make more sense to end the sentence with *é féin*, but we can read the sentence as a combination of *níl aoinne is fearr ná é féin* and *níl aoinne go bhfuil 'fhios san aige*.

The complexity of Irish syntax, with numerous instances of ellipsis and syntactical contamination, may on occasion have led learners of Muskerry Irish to have wrongly inferred such contamination. Compare the two sentences below.

> 84. *Isé ainim a bhí air 'ná Séadna.* [Séadna, p6.]


The *é* before *'ná* in the second sentence above is omitted from the transcription in the *letiriú shímplí* version of *Mo Sgéal Féin* (*b’ é duini vèach marav igè ná an Dóinal O Tuahig ciàna, Mo Shgìal Fèn*, p11). Shán Ó Cuív, who prepared the *letiriú shímplí* version of the first half of *Mo Sgéal Féin*, may have believed that the construction in sentence 85 ought to mirror that in sentence 84. Yet this sentence bears comparison with *b’iad dhá righ iad san ‘ná Conchubhar mac Neasa agus Feargus mac Ròig in Niamh* (p82), where *iadh san* occupies the equivalent slot to *é* here. In his presentation of the copula, O’Nolan cited this sentence and argued that “dá [sic] righ iad san is equivalent to an dá righ a is iadsan”. In other words, there seems to be an elided relative clause implied in such phrases (*Studies in Modern Irish: Part I*, pp19, 20).

4. Irregularities in Declension

O’Nolan noticed the frequent failure of Ua Laoghaire to decline the genitive and dative cases of nouns, and sought to arrive at a theoretical explanation of Irish syntax that could produce all the forms in Ua Laoghaire’s works. His presentation contrasts sharply with claims in later grammars of Standard Irish that it is not possible to decline multiple genitives in a row. In fact, Ua Laoghaire’s works contain many examples of multiple genitives, as well as many examples where the later rule against the concatenation of genitives is adhered to, thus giving rise to the syntactical variation O’Nolan sought to explain.

He argues here that noun phrases, including noun phrases with the verbal noun, phrases with more than one noun and phrases with a noun and an adjective, may resist inflection where the whole noun phrase is tightly bound in meaning. This means the genitive, vocative and dative do not have to be declined for such bracketed phrases, which then stand in the nominative absolute. O’Nolan calls this the Bracketed Construction, but adds that noun phrases do not have to be so used, and in that case the usage would be the Unbracketed Construction. Both are grammatically correct.

Examples of the Bracketed Construction include:

> 86. *Toisg (an saidhbhreas go leir a bheith aige).* [p159, from Guaire, Vol 1, p4.]

> 87. *I bhfochair (gach riogan diobh).* [p159, unsourced, but from Bricriu, p19.]

> 88. *Tímpal (an trimhadh h-uair).* [p159, from Na Cheithre Soisgéil, p55.]

> 89. *Fuair sé an sparán agus cead (tarang as).* [p159, from Séadna, p20.]

> 90. *I gcaitheamh (oíread agus aon lá amháin).* [p159, from Aithris ar Chriost, p118.]
In sentence 86, saidhbhreas is not declined for the genitive here as it is part of a wider phrase. In sentence 87, riogán is also part of a wider phrase, as is an trimhadh h-uair in sentence 88. Tarang as in 89 is also a phrase and the genitive of the verbal noun is not given. With respect to sentence 90, O’Nolan possibly ought to have stated that oiread is never declined, and is in any case generally part of a phrase.

The Unbracketed Construction is also possible:

91. Le linn na cainte sin do rádh dó. [p160, from Séadna, p74.]

Sometimes both constructions are combined:


(Note: Ua Laoghaire stated in Notes on Irish Words and Usages, p7: “Aoir, a satire, a lampoon. Nom. Aoír, with r broad. Gen. aoir, with r slender. Nom. plu. aoir, with r slender. Gen. plu. na n-aoir, with r broad”. Accordingly, the various forms are either /i:r/ or /i:rʹ/.)

The significance of the distinction between the Bracketed and Unbracketed Constructions for concatenated genitives is not spelt out—O’Nolan could not have known what rules would be given in later grammars—but Ua Laoghaire’s works include phrases such as:

93. Le lán toil fir an tighe. [Críost Mac Dé, Vol 1, p63.]
94. Neart slógh tíre Lochlann. [Niamh, p142.]

Here two and three genitives respectively stand side by side in the Unbracketed Construction, a usage incorrectly deemed “ungrammatical” in modern grammars.

The concept of noun phrases standing in the nominative absolute helps O’Nolan over difficulties in Ua Laoghaire’s dative usage too. For example:

95. Go raibh a dó agus dá thistiún ag (bean an tabhairne) air. [p159, from Séadna, p16.]
96. Ar (Shíle bheag). [p159, from Séadna, p18.]

In sentence 95 here, there is no dative given for bean, as, it is argued, it is part of a noun phrase. And we don’t see the dative singular feminine big in 96 because, O’Nolan argues, the noun and adjective are part of a phrase, although elsewhere in this work he explains that the dative singular feminine of the adjective is often not used anyway. Feminine adjectives ending in -ach (cf. sa chois bhacach given on p239, from Séadna, p89) are particularly resistant to inflection in the dative singular. Another example given is de’n mhuintir bheag (p239, from Na Cheithre Soisgéil, p50). For this reason, it is not clear that the noun-phrase concept is the correct explanation of ar Shíle bheag; in some cases, more than one explanation can be advanced simultaneously.

Theoretically, too, O’Nolan’s noun-phrase theory ought to apply to the vocative. For example:

97. A Íosa, a (sholus na glóire siúridhe). [p159, from Aithris ar Chríost, p141.]

O’Nolan here argued that solus is undeclined as part of a wider phrase. However, other commenters on Irish grammar have preferred to explain this by a rule, that appears to have been first clarified by T. F. Rahilly in Ériu in 1923, preventing use of metaphorical vocatives, a rule that O’Nolan didn’t appear to recognise. As solus is being used metaphorically, it would not, according to Rahilly, be declined for the vocative, whether or not it formed part of a noun phrase. It may be that O’Nolan’s views on the vocative led Shán Ó Cuív astray when preparing the letiriú shimplí version of Ó Laoghaire’s edition of An Teagasg Criostaíde: where a Fhior-Sholus! stood in Liodán Íosa in the original, Shán Ó Cuív transcribed this in letiriú shimplí as a Íor-holuish! (compare An Teagasg Criostaíde, p9, and An Teagasc Críosdy, inside front cover). However, the issue is complicated by
occasional counter-examples that may be found in Ua Laoghaire’s works, such as the following sentence, which may explain O’Nolan’s attempt to find a solution:

98. Ó, a Sholuis shioruidhe a sháruigheann ar gach solus a cruthuígheadh. [Aithris ar Chriost, p169.]

O’Nolan also advances the view that the reason why the vocative of nouns is undeclined is often because of ‘sense construction’, where the vocative refers to a woman. As vocatives are generally declined only in the first—masculine—declension, he argues that where first-declension nouns standing in the vocative such as a rún and a shólís refer to females, including the Virgin Mary, the vocative is left undeclined. The first two sentences below are adduced by O’Nolan to show the existence of sense construction in Irish; the third is a further example I have found that merits discussion.

99. Dob uasal an tseisear iad. [p218, from Táin Bó Cuailgne, p2.]

100. Ba rogha liom cómhuidhe ar an saoigal so, agus Tusa am’ fhochair, ‘ná seilbh na bhflathas a dh’fhagháil gan Tú. [p218, from Aithris ar Chriost, p232.]

101. Táid muinntir na h-Éireann bodhar agus tá clann na h-Éireann balbh! [Cómhairle ár leasa, p12.]

Seisear, a masculine noun, is treated as feminine above when referring to females. A slightly different example of sense construction in Irish is the use of ná after rogha. Rogha is not a comparative. But rogha is equivalent in the sentence above to the comparative fearr, and thus coupled with ná. In the final example, sense construction is used to couple muinntir with a plural verb, but in the very same sentence this principle is not applied to clann. Having established the existence of sense construction, O’Nolan uses it to interpret vocative phrases such as the following:

102. A Shólás na ndobrónach. [p219, unsourced, but from Liodán na Maighdine Muire in An Teagasg Criostaidhe, p43.]

103. A Eibhlín, a rún. [p219, stated as being a sentence O’Nolan heard in Ballyvourney.]

O’Nolan notes that the first of these could be interpreted as the Bracketed Construction according to his noun-phrase rule, as well as being an instance of sense construction. However, his belief that a rún! as applied to a woman is a case of sense construction conflicts with the explanation given by Ua Laoghaire in a letter he sent to Pádraig Breathnach in 1912:

I have never heard such a vocative case as a chumain. A chuman is what I have always heard. It is very likely that the phrase has always been addressed to a woman, and that there was no possibility of saying, a chumain. There is no such vocative as a stóir. It has ever and always been a stór whether addressed to a man or to a woman. [Fuinn na Smól, pviii.]

As T. F. Rahilly points out, it is not correct to say that the metaphorical vocative had never been declined in previous centuries. Even so, O’Nolan’s use of sense construction and the noun-phrase principle to explain non-declension of the metaphorical vocative should be seen as a creative, but mistaken, attempt to arrive at a grammatical rule that could explain the forms O’Nolan found in Ua Laoghaire’s works.

There are occasions where the noun-phrase principle cannot explain the lack of a genitive, and O’Nolan had to accept that some verbal nouns resist inflexion. Examples given (p144) include chun maireachtaínt, chun buachaínt, chun aireachtaínt, all of which are listed with genitives in the dictionary. Genitive forms such as maireachtaínte and maireachtana may be used by other writers, but are not found in Ua Laoghaire’s works. By contrast, phrases such as chun labhartha and chun imithe are frequently found in Ua Laoghaire’s works. Some further examples are noted:

104. Chun croídhe-bhrúghadh. [p144, from Aithris ar Chriost, p257.]
Croidhe-bhrúghadh is an example of a compound noun that resists inflexion. *Tabhairt suas,* which is cited here as a compound that resists inflexion, could also be parsed as a noun phrase, standing as such in the nominative absolute.

On other occasions, the surprising standing of the noun in the *bunfhoirm,* i.e. what is now the nominative-accusative of the noun, can be explained by reference to accusative usage, a use that is no longer morphologically distinct. For example, in *an té is lag creideamh,* O’Nolan argues [p213] that *creideamh* is the ‘accusative of respect or specification’, stating in respect of what the person is weak. This construction is usual with comparatives and superlatives:

106. *Ní raibh duine... ba mhó áthas ‘ná Niamh.* [p213, unsourced, but from *Niamh,* p28.]

Similarly, time and space phrases commonly stand in the *bunfhoirm,* which can be analysed as the accusative of time and space. In *d’imigh sé an cnoc suas* (given unsourced on p215), *an cnoc suas* is a noun phrase of adverbial meaning standing in the accusative, although the accusative is morphologically identical to the nominative in modern Irish. *An oiread san* is, O’Nolan points out (p214), an old accusative of time, which is now applied to non-temporal relations too.

Yet the accusative case cannot be cited to explain all instances of non-declension. O’Nolan points out (p220) that proleptic *a* and *dá* are followed by the nominative absolute (and not the genitive). E.g. *a luighead airgead,* where *airgead* is in the nominative. Other examples: *dá fheabhas ri; dá luighead é thu,* etc (all three examples are given on p220 unsourced, but the construction is commonly found). Such detailed specification of where nominative and accusative usage is being employed may be tied to O’Nolan’s familiarity with Latin grammar; learners of modern Irish may find it easier to see parallels between *ba mhó áthas* and *a luighead airgead,* rather than regarding one as accusative and the other as nominative usage.

Finally, O’Nolan points out that phrases in apposition can be out of construction: an example is *ba mhór an t-uathbhás é, an té a chífeadh é*—an example for which no source is indicated on p220—where *an té* is in the nominative absolute (with no attempt to use the preposition *le* before it). Some sentences include whole phrases not governed by prepositions that are also out of construction:

107. *Ar tháinig gach ri an lion a gealladh?* [pp160, 220, from *Táin Bó Cuailnge,* p37.]

This sentence means “did each king come with the complement (of men) that was promised?” O’Nolan could also have pointed to Ua Laoghaire’s comments on the use of *féachaint:*

An Irish substantive is frequently used alone as a word expressing manner, time, occasion, etc., according to the nature of the substantive. For example: *féachaint d’á dtug sé thar a ghualainn chonaic sé*… Here one might expect a preposition before *féachaint,* *le féachaint,* or something of that sort. [Notes on Irish Words and Usages, p135.]

O’Nolan’s contribution to Irish grammar

*Studies in Modern Irish Part 1* is unusual in the level of intricacy that the author attempts in his explanations of Irish grammar. There are numerous points of grammar that are explained therein that lack adequate discussion elsewhere. It is highly likely that readers of traditional Munster Irish will find reference grammars such as *Graiméar Gaeilge na mBráithre Criostai* wholly inadequate for their purposes. This is, of course, because *Graiméar Gaeilge* does not claim or aim to be a reference grammar of traditional Munster Irish. Given the fixation of O’Nolan with the writings of Ua Laoghaire, it seems unlikely that the grammatical forms found in Ua Laoghaire’s works can be well understood without a close reading of *Studies in Modern Irish.*

The pioneering work of Ua Laoghaire and O’Nolan in laying down the foundations of Irish grammatical analysis is nevertheless evident in *Graiméar Gaeilge.* Ua Laoghaire wrote extensively
on subjects such as the difference between the copula and the substantive verb and the use of the autonomous form of the verb. O’Nolan’s in-depth approach to the copula, the relative clause (including his identification of multiple relative clauses) and his detailed discussion of prolepsis in Irish sentences in chapter 2 of *Studies in Modern Irish Part 1* also amounted to groundbreaking work that has influenced understandings of Irish grammar ever since.

This does not mean, however, that everything in O’Nolan’s presentation is useful. His general approach seems to have been to assume that everything Ua Laoghaire wrote was good Irish: he aimed to *describe* Ua Laoghaire’s Irish and *prescribe* his usages to learners, and so the possibility that Ua Laoghaire, like all native speakers of a language, may on some occasions have used looser syntax that required a good edit, seems not to have been adequately considered. Moreover, the *ad hoc* nature of some of O’Nolan’s explanations means that they sometimes appear to be have been conjured up out of thin air, serving more as a way of explaining the variety in Ua Laoghaire’s Irish to himself than as proven historical explanations for each point, based on extensive research in old manuscripts. However, O’Nolan’s general point, that Irish contains extensive evidence of analogical developments and cross-contamination between sentences, seems difficult to deny, posing many conundrums in the explanation of idioms.

**References**


Ó Cadhlaigh, Cormac. *Gníos na Gaedhilge*, Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1940.


