The (co-)evolution of partitive argument marking in Breton and Gallo-Angevin French (preliminary title)

Elisabeth Stark¹ and Paul Widmer¹

¹University of Zurich

In Middle Breton (Insular Celtic, Indo-European; spoken in Brittany between 12 cent.–c. 1650 CE, well attested from the 15th cent. onwards, cf. Hemon 1975), indefinite partitive constructions (= indicating an indefinite amount of a definite substance, Hoeksema 1996) in object position may be marked with a particular marker $a$, cf. example (1a), in which the direct pronominal object of a low transitivity verb of ingestion is preceded by the allomorph $anez$/ahan- of $a$. The paradigm of this marker is given in (1b). The alternative encoding regularly has the pronominal direct object prefixed to the verb without the marker $a$, cf. (1c).

(1) a. $anez$-aff $taff$-$er$
   of 3SGM taste PRLPRS
   ‘on en goûte/one tastes (of) it (sc. of a drink)’
   M 2428; 16th cent.

b. $ahan$-off $ahan$-$ot$ $anez$-$aff$ $anez$-$i$ $ahan$-$omp$ $ahan$-$ech$ $anez$-$e$
   of 1SG of 2SG of 3SGM of 3SGM of 1PL of 2PL of 3PL
   Hémon 1975, 101f.

c. $en$-$guel$-aff
   3SGM see PRLKG
   I see him

The marker $a$ reconstructs to an Insular-Celtic adposition with separative/source semantics ‘from, of’, roughly comparable in meaning to Romance DE.

Substantival direct objects may be marked with $a$, too (ex. 2). Parallel to French $de$, Middle Breton $a$ is also attested with the complements of presentational/existential constructions under the scope of negation as in ex. (3).

(2) $pren$-$it$
   buy IMP 3PL of=bread
   ‘Achetez du pain!/Buy some bread!’
   Qu, 17th cent.

(3) $nac$ $eux$ $quet$ $a$-$trecte$
   NEG COOR have PRL EMPH $a$=mercy
   ‘Et il n’y a pas de pardon./And there is no mercy.’
   M 1602; 16th cent.

In (1a), the construction $a$ + pronominal direct object looks like the semantic, but not morphosyntactic equivalent of French $en$, the (also) partitive clitic pronoun (‘on en goûte’; cf. Ihsane 2013). In (3), Breton $a$ looks like French $de$ under the scope of negation, a minimal determiner possibly related to the ‘partitive article’ du/des (cf. Kayne 1977; Ihsane 2008; Ihsane 2013; Stark 2016).
Language contact thus might have played a role in the evolution of these constructions – all the more so since the sister languages of Breton (Welsh and Cornish) did not develop similar constructions.

In our talk, we would like to retrace the emergence of the marker a in the aforementioned contexts as well as the semantically equivalent en-construction in (2) and the ‘negative de’ determiner in Old Gallo-Angevin documents in order to test the language contact hypothesis. We will check available data for lexical items, semantic classes, morphological features (gender, number, case), referential properties, position, grammatical category (pronoun vs. NP), interaction with negation, for the direct object constituent, as well as clause types, and genres for their overall distribution.

Abbreviations


References


Abbreviations used in the glosses

1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person, COOR = coordinator, EMPH = emphatic (particle), F = feminine, IMP = imperative, IMPERS = impersonal, M = masculine, NEG = negative, PL = plural, PRS = present, SG = singular.