

2002

A Brief Characterisation of Morphological Causation in Irish

Brian Nolan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/itbj>



Part of the [Celtic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nolan, Brian (2002) "A Brief Characterisation of Morphological Causation in Irish," *The ITB Journal*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 6.

doi:10.21427/D7HP7D

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/itbj/vol3/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Ceased publication at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in The ITB Journal by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#)

A Brief Characterisation of Morphological Causation in Irish

Brian Nolan

School of Informatics and Engineering
Institute of Technology Blanchardstown

brian.nolan@itb.ie

1 Introduction

In this paper we attempt to characterise some elements of morphological causation as expressed in modern Irish. Three types of causation may be identified: lexical, periphrastic and morphological. In terms of the relative weightings of each type, the morphological causative is the least productive. Its use appears to be highly constrained to two very specific domains and it is signalled by particular morphological affixes. Lexical causatives are more productive than the morphological causative. By contrast, periphrastic or analytical causatives are highly productive and wide-ranging in their deployment. We concentrate in this analysis on some data on morphological causation.

2 Morphological Causatives

2.1 Change Marked on Verb to Signal Volition and Agency

Morphological causation requires that, when expressed, some level of change be recorded on the verb. This type of causation is the least common type found in Irish. The examples in this study relate to two specific verbs, the first of which is prefixed by *dún*, as in *dún+marú* 'murder', and the second of which is prefixed by *for*, as in *for+eigniú* 'force'. These prefixes modify just two causative verbs. A characteristic of both of these base verbs is that, without the causative morphological prefix, they are lexical causatives with a resultant change of state of the undergoer participant. Neither *dún* nor *for* have any independent existence other than as a prefix. Though now opaque, it is possible that historically these may have represented compounds, though I am not aware of any supporting evidence to elaborate on this possibility. A nominal with a morphological shape similar to *dún* does exist with the meaning of 'castle/fort/haven'. A verb *dún* 'close' also exists. These do not form a compound with a

verb in any usage. The causative prefix *dún* serves to signal a very strong agency with the highest motivated intent. The actor whose agency is marked with the causative morphological prefix on the verb is always animate and human. The causative prefix *dún* has a highly restricted distribution. Its domain of use is limited to marking the strongest agency with full control, intent, motivation and deliberation on the part of the human actor on the base causative verb *maraigh* ‘kill’. In contrast, the causative prefix *for* functions as a morphological marker in causative constructions signalling intensified force.

To motivate this analysis we examine three different ‘cause to die’ contexts. These range from the case where: a) the causation may be accidental but a time lag exists possibly between the cause and its effect; b) the causation may be accidental but no time lag exists between the cause and its effect; to c), non-accidental motivated causation on the part of the actor with an immediate consequence for the undergoer. We illustrate this as a cline with the following table.

(1)

<i>Verb</i>	<i>Bhásaigh</i>	<i>Mharaigh</i>	<i>Dhúnmaraigh</i>
Actor	± Accidental Causation	± Accidental Causation	- Accidental Causation
Undergoer	± Immediate Effect	+ Immediate Effect	+ Immediate Effect
Time	± Time lag	- Time lag	- Time lag

2.1.1 Time Distance between Cause and Effect

The causative occurrence of death on the undergoer can be expressed in yet a different way by a speaker, particularly when that speaker wishes to convey information as to whether the means of causing death is direct, or not. Use of this particular verb *bhásaigh* ‘kill’ reflects that the death may have taken place some time after the causative act was undertaken, or that the means of the killing was somehow indirect but still no less intended. Accidental causation is possible here and its effects are not necessarily immediate for the undergoer. A typical example of this is given next with a transitive clause coding for two participants in its logical structure. The clause is causative with an animate and human actor and an animate undergoer.

- (2) *Bhásaigh Bran an luch.*
 Kill:V-PAST Bran:N the:DET mouse:N
 LIT: 'Bran died the mouse'.
 Bran caused the mouse to die.

do'(Bran,0) CAUSE BECOME [**básaigh'**(an luch)]

The clause reflects [\pm accidental causation, \pm immediate effects, \pm time lag].

2.1.2 Possible Accidental Causation

In this section we examine accidental causation where, while the result of the causation is not in question, the agency, control and motivated intent of the actor may be in doubt. We can see an example of this in (3) of a causative accomplishment where there may not be strong control or motivated intention by the actor, indicating accidental causation with the possibility of immediate effects for the undergoer.

(O Baoill 1996: 23)

- (3) *Muirfidh sé é féin ag obair.*
 kill:V-FUT he:PN him:PN self:PART at:PP working:VN
 He will kill himself working.

ag'(obair', [**do'**(sé₁) CAUSE BECOME [**maraigh'**(é'(féin₁))]])

(Foinse, 7 October 2001: 15)

- (4) *Mharaigh siad an t-iriseoir.*
 Kill:V-PAST they:PN the:DET reporter:N
 They killed the reporter.

do'(siad) CAUSE BECOME [**maraigh'**(an t-iriseoir)]

Example (4) contains a transitive clause coding for two arguments and is causative. The expression of causativity in this example allows for accidental or unintentional causation where the intention of actor may be in doubt. There is, however, unquestionably a very strong implication of result, that is, death for the undergoer.

(Míceál O Cíosóg. Annagael: 114)

(5) "Och, chuala tú faoin bheirt leads óga a **mharraigh iad féin** toisc nach raibh siad in ann obair a fháil. Bhuel . . . tá Cóilín agus cara leis i ndiaidh an cleas céanna d'imirt. **Mharraigh siad iad féin - phlúch siad iad féin** istigh i ngaráiste agus gás ag teacht ó inneall gluaisteáin. Maidin inniu."

"... have you heard about the two young lads that killed themselves because they could not find any work. Well ... Cóilín and a friend have played the same trick. They killed themselves – they suffocated themselves inside a garage with the fumes coming from a car engine. This morning."

Another example is given above and, in this, we can see that the effects of the caused act unfolded over a very brief time period, but is essentially immediate. The intent here appears to be quite intentional on behalf of the actors.

These clauses reflect [\pm accidental causation, + immediate effects, - time lag].

2.1.3 Strong Agency via Morphological Marking

In the logical structure representation (6) of the verb with the causative prefix *dún*, we use the predicate **DO'**[...] to indicate a very highly motivated actor who is a prototypical agent in the causation, after Dowty (1979) and Van Valin & LaPolla (1997). The causation reflected here is not accidental and the effects on the undergoer are immediate. The verbal noun form of the verb is used in example (7) and (8).

(6) *Dhúnmharaigh an gadaí an cailín.*

Murder:V-PAST the:DET thief:N the:DET girl:N

The thief murdered the girl.

DO'[do'(an gadaí, [**dhúnmharaigh'**(an gadaí, an cailín)])] CAUSE

BECOME [**be'**(**dúnmharaithe'**(an cailín))]

(Ní Dhuibhne, Éilís: Dúnmharú sa Daingean: 139)

7) *Deineadh dúnmharú den saghas céanna i dTrá Lí mí ó shin.*

Deineadh *dúnmharú*

Make:V-IMPERS-PASS-PAST murder:VN

den saghas céanna

of:PP+the:DET same:ADJ kind:N

i dTrá Lí mí ó shin

in:PP Tralee:N month:N from:PP then:DET

Lit: '(Someone) made a murder of the same kind in Tralee a month before that'

Someone committed the same kind of murder in Tralee a month before.

(Ó Baille, Ruaidhrí: Dúnmharú ar an Dart: 52)

(8) *Chomh maith leis sin, bhí sé freagrach as ar a laghad sé dhúnmharú le dhá bhliain anuas.*

Chomh maith leis sin, bhí sé freagrach

As:ADV well:ADJ with:PP that:DET be:SUBV he:PN answerable:ADJ

as ar a laghad sé dhúnmharú

from:PP on:PP that:REL reduce::V-PAST he:PN murder:VN

le dhá bhliain anuas.

with:PP two:NUM years:N up:ADV

As well as that, he was answerable because he committed murder for the last two years.

Because of the constraint of its fixed distribution on the verb coding murder as distinct from killing, this example of direct causation has the strongest agency, intention and control by the actor, and with the strongest implication of the result of the action on the undergoer. The result is so strong that it is not in question. The intensified agency with the causation is morphologically marked with the prefix *dún*. Quite possibly, it is significant that the use of this prefix is reserved for describing the most serious of criminal acts, that of murder. It is this fact which bounds its distribution, presumably as a function of the means by which society recognises and communicates the height of its abhorrence for the taking of human life. These examples of *dún* constructions in clauses reflect [- accidental causation, + immediate effects, - time lag].

The deployment of the causative prefix *dún* is an example of morphological marking on the base verb. The base verb in this instance is, however, already causative and the marking in question indicates a heightened agency, volition, control, intent and motivation. The morphological prefix *dún* is therefore a marker of intense agency. The morphological prefix *dún* signals the highly agentive action that has immediate consequences for the undergoer. We motivated this analysis with an account of three cause-to-die verbs and found that a cline exists with attributes that range over actor and undergoer.

The iconicity pyramid of Haiman (1983) diagrams the vertical cline between less direct to direct causation. The cline we find here in this analysis augments the Haiman pyramid horizontally for morphological causation with respect to accidental/non-accidental causation with immediate/delayed effects on the undergoer.

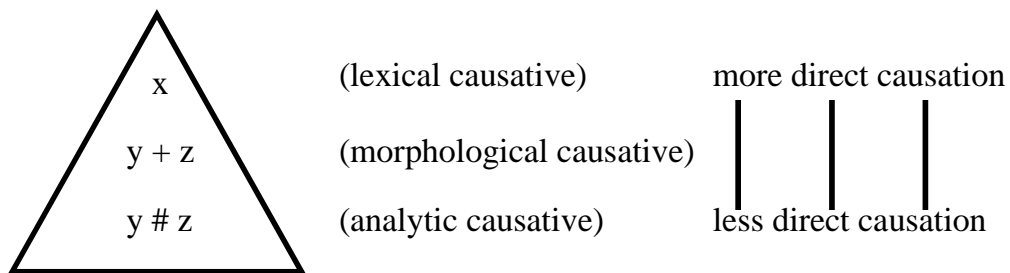


Figure 1. Haiman's Iconicity Pyramid

2.2 Change Marked on Verb to Signal Intensification of Action

The use of the morphological prefix *for* indicates an intensification of the causative force in the act of violence encoded within the base predicate in the clause. The difference between the use of the prefix, and its absence, can be captured using the examples of the verb *éighnigh* 'violence' and the verb *foréighnigh* 'extreme violence', within the following table.

(9)

	<i>éighnigh</i>	<i>foréighnigh</i>
Actor	- Accidental Causation	± Accidental Causation
Undergoer	+ Immediate Effect	+ Immediate Effect

We illustrate this in relation to the verb *éighnigh* 'force/violence/ravish', which lexically records an act of violence of some kind undertaken by a human and animate actor against a human and animate undergoer. The actor and undergoer roles can be elaborated by instances

of singular or plural count nominals. The verb *éignigh* codes for non-accidental causation with immediate consequences for the undergoer.

(Ó Cíosóg: Annagael: 184)

(10) *Fógraíodh freisin go mbeadh pionós an bháis ann i gcás marú Garda, marú saighdiúra, drugaí a scaipeadh nó a dhíol go mídhleathach, agus i gcás éigniú ban nó seandaoine a ionsaí.*

Fógraíodh freisin go
 Announced:V-PAST also:PART go:PP
mbeadh pionós an bháis
 be:SUBV:fut penalty:N the: DEF death:N
ann i gcás marú Garda, marú saighdiúra,
 there:ADV in:PN case:N killing:VN Police-Officer:N killing:VN soldier:N
drugaí a scaipeadh nó a dhíol go mídhleathach,
 drugs:N to:REL spread:VN or: CONN to:REL sell:VN to:PN unfortunates:N
agus, i gcás éigniú ban
 and:CONJ in:PN case:N rape:VN women:N
nó seandaoine a ionsaí.
 or: CONJ old:ADJ+people:N to:REL attack:VN

Lit: ‘Also announced was that there will be the death penalty in the case of killing of a police officer, killing a soldier, selling drugs to addicts and in the case of rape of women or attacks on old people’.

Also announced was that the death penalty will apply in the case of killing a police officer, killing a soldier, selling drugs to addicts and in the case of rape of women or attacks on old people.

When the prefix *for* is added to the verb *foréignigh*, the act of violence is signalled as intensified with the same immediate consequences for the undergoer. In addition, as in example (11) and (12), use of the prefix appears to soften the commitment to the agency, control and motivated intent of the actor.

(Cuisle: March 1999: 11)

- (11) *Bhí daoine eile sa phobal a mhaígh go mbeadh ar an pbobal roganna eile neamhfhóireánacha a aimsiú chun plé leis an choiriúlacht shóisialta, agus í dtús na sosanna cogaidg i 1994 díriodh aird ar chuardach na roganna eile seo.*

There were other people in the community who claimed that the people had other non-violent choices, (and) that aimed for discussion with the social parties, and in the beginning of the truces in the fighting in 1994 focused high on the search of these other choices.

(Cuisle: March 1999: 11)

- (12) *Toradh ar chuardach na modanna neamhfhóireánacha chun plé le coiriúlachta atá sa tuairisc ar restorative justice. Is iad inclusion agus mediation na príomheilimintí sa chóras.*

The fruits of the searching for non-violent methods for discussion with the parties are in the report on restorative justice. They are inclusion and mediation, the primary elements of the system.

The constructions have the logical structure schema indicated in (13) for *éignigh* and (14) for *foréignigh*, which thereby identifies for each the situation type and its participants. The use of this prefix is indicative of increased intensity of the violent action by the actor. Used with the verb *éignigh*, the prefix is indicative of extremity of force. With respect to example (13), the undergoer participant, the NP *an ban* ‘the woman’ and the verb *éignigh* ‘violate’ can form compound into a new verb *banéignigh* ‘rape of a woman’.

- (13) *Éignigh an saighiúir an ban.*
Force:V-PAST the:DET soldier:N the:DET woman:N
The soldier violated the woman.

do’(an saighiúir, 0) CAUSE BECOME éignigh’(an ban)

- (14) *Foréignigh na saighiúirí an baile.*
Force:V-PAST the:DET-pl soldiers:N the:DET town:N
The soldiers raised the town.

do’(an saighiúirí) CAUSE BECOME foréignigh’(an baile)

We have discussed two morphological prefixes. The prefix *dún*+V morphologically marks the verb as strongly agentive, with all the attributes that that implies. Its distribution is highly restricted. The prefix *for*+V also deploys as a morphological marking on the base verb, but codes for an increased intensity of the caused action of the verb, with a possible weakening of the agency.

3 Summary of Morphological Causation

The cline that represents the verbs of ‘cause to die’, within which the rightmost *dún* prefix operates, is indicated in the following table. We can see that it codes for non-accidental causation on the part of the actor and immediate causative effects for the undergoer.

(15)

	<i>Bhásaigh</i>	<i>Mharaigh</i>	<i>Dhúnmaraigh</i>
Verb			
Actor	± Accidental Causation	± Accidental Causation	- Accidental Causation
Undergoer	± Immediate Effect	+ Immediate Effect	+ Immediate Effect
Time	± Time lag	- Time lag	- Time lag

The cline for the two verbs of violent action is indicated below. In this, we have at one pole non-accidental causation by an actor participant while at the other pole we have the possibility of either accidental or volitional causation by the actor. With both poles we have immediate effects for the undergoer.

(16)

	<i>Éighnigh</i>	<i>Foréignigh</i>
Actor	- Accidental Causation	± Accidental Causation
Undergoer	+ Immediate Effect	+ Immediate Effect

In this paper we examined some elements of morphological causatives as found in modern Irish. Two specific instances of morphological markings, ranging over a highly constrained and restricted distribution of verbs pertaining to extreme violence against the person were explained in terms of a cline. We found that the morphological markings appear to be restricted to indicating causation with the highest level of agency, in the case of the *dún* prefix, and to intensified violent action in the case of *for*. With these two prefixes we found that they played a role in indicating a position on a cline for accidental/deliberate causation

on the part of an actor and, for the undergoer, whether the causative effects were immediate or not.

4 References

- Ball, J. Martin, and Fife, James. (1993). *The Celtic Languages*. Routledge, London and New York.
- Borsley, R. D. and Roberts. I. (1996). *The Syntax of the Celtic Languages: a comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, England.
- Christian Brothers. (1997). *New Irish Grammar*. C.J. Fallon, Mount Salus Press, Dublin, Ireland.
- DeLancey, Scott. (1983). Agentivity and Causation. *Berekely Linguistics Society*, 9: 54-63.
- DeLancey, Scott. (1984). Notes on agentivity and causation. *SIL*, 8: 181-213.
- Dowty, David R. (1979). *Word Meaning and Montague Grammar*. Reidel, Dordrecht.
- Gregor, D.B. (1980). *Celtic. A Comparative Study of the Six Celtic Languages: Irish, Gaelic, Manx, Welsh, Cornish, Breton*. The Oleander Press, Cambridge, England and New York, USA.
- Haiman, John. (1983). Iconic and Economic Motivations. *Language* 59. 781-819.
- Haspelmath, Martin. (1993). More on the typology of inchoative/causative verb Alterations. In Comrie. B. and Polinsky, M. (eds). *Causatives and Transitivity*. John Benjamin Publishing Company, Amsterdam and Philadelphia.
- Ní Dhuibhne, Éilís. (2000). *Dúnmharú sa Daingean*. CoisLife, Baile Átha Cliath.
- Ó Baille, Ruaidhrí. (1989). *Dúnmharú ar an Dart*. Cló Lar-Chonnachta, Indreabhán, Gaillimhe, Éire.
- O Baoill, Donall, P. (1996). *An Teanga Beo: Gaeilge Uladh*. Instidiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann, Baile Átha Cliath.
- O Cíosóg, Míceál. (1997). *Annagael*. Coiscéim. Baile Átha Cliath.
- Payne, Thomas. E. (1997). *Describing Morphosyntax: A guide for field linguists*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Shopen, T. (Ed.). (1985a). *Language Typology & Syntactic Description* Volume 1: Clause Structure. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge MA.
- Shopen, T. (Ed.). (1985b). *Language Typology & Syntactic Description* Volume 3: Grammatical Categories and the Lexicon. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge MA.
- Song, Jae Jong. (1996). *Causatives and Causation: A Universal-Typological Perspective*. Longman, London and New York.
- Stenson, Nancy. (1981) *Studies in Irish Syntax*. Narr, Tübingen.
- Talmy, Leonard. (1976). Semantic Causative Types in *Syntax and Semantics* No. 6. Academic Press, New York.
- Talmy, Leonard. (1978). Figure and Ground in Complex Sentences. In J. H. Greenberg (Ed.). *Universals of Human Language iv: Syntax*. Stanford University Press. Stanford.
- Talmy, Leonard. (1985). Lexicalisation patterns: Semantic Structure in Lexical Forms in T. Shopen (Ed.), *Language Typology & Syntactic Description* 3: Grammatical Categories and the Lexicon. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge MA.
- Talmy, Leonard. (1988). Force Dynamics, in language and cognition, *Cognitive Science* 12:49-100.
- Talmy, Leonard. (1996a). Windowing of attention in language in *Grammatical Constructions, their form and meaning* by Shibatani & Thompson. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Talmy, L. (1996b). Fictive motion in Language and “Ception”: The Emanation Type, in P. Bloom et al (Eds.), *Language and Space*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA.
- Talmy, L. (2000). *Towards a Conceptual Semantics*, Volume 1 and 2. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Van Valin, Robert D. and LaPolla, Randy J. (1997). *Syntax: structure, meaning, and Function*. Cambridge textbooks in linguistics. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- Whaley, Lindsay. J. (1997). *Introduction to Typology: The unity and diversity of language*. Sage Publications, London.