Irish autonomous verbs in a semantic-pragmatic interface: Some reflections on information structure-driven valency reduction

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Abstract

Autonomous verbs in Irish are special verb forms incompatible with the surface realization of a subject. Previous studies have suggested to postulate empty categories such as pro, PRO or expletive pro to fill the subject position (cf. Stenson 1989; McCloskey 2007; Bondaruk/ Charzyńska-Wóicjk 2003), thus rejecting the idea that these verbs might be classified as completely subjectless. A series of syntactic tests bear out the hypothesis that, at least for Irish, these verbs behave as actually lacking a subject. I first suggest correlating this state of affairs to the fact that, with autonomous verbs, no argument role to be promoted to subject position is selected at the valency level, although it is "implied" in the unfolding of the event. Secondly, I argue that both valency reduction and syntactic non-realization of an argument role is driven by information structural constraints; notably, the focal nature of autonomous verbs (as advocated elsewhere, cf. Nolan 2012) causes the subject (together with the argument role it is associated with) to be informationally downgraded, thereby leading to its suppression in the sentence. The position held in this paper is that autonomous verbs of the Irish type epitomize an interesting phenomenon of semantic-pragmatic interface, with the pragmatic level of the utterance "mediating" between the semantic and the syntactic level; in such a perspective, the pragmatic (information structural) level of an utterance would determine either the number and type of argument roles a verb can take in a particular discourse context (cf. DuBois 1987; Goldberg 2006) and their syntactic encoding.

1 Introduction

This paper tackles the phenomenon of autonomous verbs in Irish from a semantic-pragmatic interface. Despite being the bulk of much contention so far, the status and syntactic behavior of autonomous verbs in this and other Celtic languages[1] have never been thoroughly addressed from the perspective of utterances' information structure properties.

On the syntactic level, Irish autonomous forms cannot be followed by a subject (differently from canonical declarative sentences). Previous studies, mostly within generative frameworks

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[1] Welsh autonomous verbs are extensively described in Arman (2016), while the same phenomenon in Breton is outlined in Hewitt (2002).

(cf. Stenson 1989; McCloskey 2007; Bondaruk/Charzyńska-Wóicjk 2003), have suggested to postulate empty categories such as PRO, pro or expletive pro to fill the subject position, thus rejecting the idea that these verbs might be classified as completely subjectless. The results yielded by a series of syntactic subjecthood tests will be discussed that bear out the hypothesis that, at least for Irish, these verbs actually behave as lacking a subject.

In this work, I will capitalize on these issues, as well as on the outlines to date available in the literature, to put forth the hypothesis that Irish autonomous verbs are truly subjectless, and I will seek to lay out this view on the basis of two essential aspects. First, I suggest that the surface omission of a subject hinges on the fact that, with autonomous verbs, no argument role to be promoted to subject position is selected at the valency level (despite its being "implied" in the unfolding of the event). Secondly, I argue that this valency reduction condition is driven by information structural constraints; notably, the salience brought on the autonomous verb would cause the "instigator" of the event to be informationally downgraded, thereby leading to its suppression as argument role and as potential subject of the sentence. The position held in this paper is that Irish autonomous verbs epitomize a special case of semantic-pragmatic inter-face, in whicffh the pragmatic (information structural) level mediates between the semantic and the syntactic level of an autonomous sentence; more precisely, in such sentence types in Irish, information structure would determine either the number and type of argument roles a verb can take in a particular discourse context (cf. DuBois 1987; Goldberg 2006) and their syntactic encoding.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the phenomenon of autonomous verbs in Irish as well as their formal and syntactic features in common language use. Section 3 deals with the assessment of the presence/absence of a subject with this class of verbs considering how they are likely to respond to specific tests of subjecthood. Section 4 zooms in on how the information structure level of utterances impinges on the determination of both valency patterns and on the surface realization of argument roles. Some final remarks on the difference between the properties of autonomous verbs and those of agented vs. agentless passives, on the one hand, and those of thetic judgments (Kuroda 1972), on the other, are fleshed out in Section 5.

2   Autonomous verbs in Irish

Irish is a VSO language of the Goidelic (or Gaelic) sub-group of the Celtic family. Although older proto-Celtic attestations seem to point to a former SVO sentence structure (cf. Sims-Wil-liams 2020), with a possible subsequent raising of the verb at the beginning of the sentence, the Celtic family is the sole Indo-European branch to display this verb-initial word order (cf. Lu-raghi 1995). An all-new declarative sentence in Irish would thus have the structure in (1).

(1)   *Cheannaigh   Máire   carr*
        Buy.PST   Mary   car
        'Mary bought a car.'

In the so-called "Caighdeán Oifigiúil" (the Official Standard), each verb paradigm typically has synthetic and analytic forms (cf. Stenson 2008, 1991). Synthetic forms are characterized by personally inflected verbs, with morphological endings bearing information on the person and

number of the subject. These forms are typically found in first persons (i. e. *I* and *we*), in which case no separate subject pronoun is allowed after the verb. Conversely, analytic forms (for all other grammatical persons) do not have person-number inflections and thus require an explicit subject pronoun.

Another important characteristic of Irish verb paradigms is the distinction between personal and (impersonal) autonomous inflections, these latter known in Irish as *briathar saor* 'free verb' (cf. O'Donovan 1845; Ó Murchú 2013; Ó Siadhail 1989; among others). All tenses and moods in an Irish verb paradigm have a corresponding autonomous inflection. By way of illustration, I report in (2) the autonomous forms of the verb *cuir* ('put, send, bury') where the autonomous endings have been separated from the root (cf. McCloskey 2007: 825).

(2) *cuir-tear*   Present Tense   (personal > *cuireann*)
     cuir-eadh   Past Tense   (personal > *chuir*)
     cuir-fear   Future Tense   (personal > *cuirfidh*)
     chuir-fí   Conditional Mood   (personal > *chuirfeadh*)
     chuir-tí   Past Habitual   (personal > *chuirinn*)

While personal forms represent the typical case of fully-inflected verbs (with person-number grammatical information) followed by a subject phrase (when the inflection is analytic), autonomous forms are uninflected and no subject constituent can be superficially realized, neither after the verb (as its canonical position would be), nor in any other position in the sentence, as an oblique *by*-phrase, for example. Therefore, uses such as (3b) and (3c) would not be deemed acceptable in contemporary Irish.

(3a) *Roghnaítear*   *leabhair*   *eachtraíochta*
      Select.AUT.PRES   book.PL   adventure
      'Adventure books are selected'

(3b) **Roghnaítear*   *duine éigin*   *leabhair*   *eachtraíochta*
      Select.AUT.PRES   person some   book.PL   adventure
      'Someone selects adventure books

(3c) *Roghnaítear*   *leabhair*   *eachtraíochta*   **ag*   *duine*   *éigin*
      Select.AUT.PRES   book.PL   adventure   at(by)   person   some
      'Someone selects adventure books'

Ó Sé (2006: 109) remarks that agentive *ag*-phrases have sporadically appeared in formal written texts, such as the following occurrence from the 1937 Irish Constitution (written by Mícheál Ó Gríobhtha, a native speaker of Irish from County Clare, Munster).

(4) *Is ag an Uachtarán a **ceapfar** breithiúin na Cúirte Uachtaraí*
     'It is by the President that judges of the Supreme Court will be **appointed**'

Differently from the instances in (3), though, (4) is a clear example of a cleft sentence in which the agentive phrase (*ag an Uachtarán* 'by the President') appears syntactically dislocated and placed right after the copula *Is*. An example of the same type (judged as acceptable by an Irish speaker from Dublin) is given in (5).

(5) *Is ag an mbord a **dhéanfar** cinneadh*
     'It is by the Board/Council that a decision will be **taken**'

A possible reason why agent phrases are allowed to be expressed in these cases, despite the presence of autonomous verbs, could be put down to their focal nature, somehow established by the informational patterning of most cleft sentences in other languages. Yet, the limited number of examples considered here, with mostly institutional referents (*an Uachtarán* 'the President of the Republic' and *an mbord* 'the Board/Council') does not allow saying more on these reported uses.[2]

A further interesting trait of autonomous inflections in Irish is that they can apply to both transitive (6) and intransitive verbs (7), which marks an important difference between these verb types and canonical passives.

(6) *Ullmhaítear*   *cácaí*   *anseo*
     Prepare.AUT   cake.PL   here
     'Here cakes are prepared'
(7) *Siúlfar*   *abhaile*
     walk.FUT.AUT   homeward
     'One will walk home'

As it will be argued later, the mainstream literature has generally classified these verbs as active; as a matter of fact, in such cases no actual restructuring of syntactic roles obtains (cf. McCloskey 2007): although a subject is apparently absent from the semantic-syntactic configuration of the sentence, the object keeps its object function and position, thus not moving anywhere else in the sentence.

Whether or not the subject position has to be regarded as altogether empty has long been a matter of contention, especially within generativist frameworks which were mostly interested in gauging the extent to which these verb types constitute a challenge to the Extended Projection Principle (cf. Chomsky 1982). In the following section, it will be pointed out that the behavior of Irish autonomous forms with respect to tests of subjecthood is quite revealing, and it also partly deflects from what has been observed for analogous verb types in other languages within and outside the Celtic family (e. g. Welsh, Breton, Polish, Ukranian, among others).[3]

3   Subject status in Irish autonomous sentences

In earlier and more recent contention, autonomous verbs have been generally characterized as focusing the event rather than its participants. In a seminal account, Ó Cadhlaigh (1940: 54) defined autonomous verbs as being "used when the agent is unknown or when one does not want to mention it".[4] Hansson (2004: 14) states that autonomous verbs are structurally charac-

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[2] Ó Sé (2006: 88) is particularly critical on the way some scholars (whom he does not consider truly specialist in the Irish language) have addressed the overt expression of agents after autonomous verbs. He contends that, more often than not, the examples of uses of agent phrases with autonomous verbs that have been discussed in the literature are neither telling nor relevant to demonstrate the unsystematic incompatibility of these forms with the surface encoding of agentive complements. He further noticed that in most earlier political poems, the use of agent phrases was mostly associated with highly marked syntax.

[3] For Polish autonomous (also called "impersonal") verb forms cf. Billings/Maling (1995); Lavine (2005); Kibort (2008).

[4] In some earlier and recent works, the term *agent* appears to be used interchangeably with *subject*. However, autonomous morphology in Irish can also be found with verbs selecting an experiencer as first participant (e. g.

terized by their ending and indicate an agent whose identity is unspecified, whereas Nolan (2012) stressed the function these verb forms have of emphasizing the event. Because of the impersonal nuance they add to a sentence, these verbs have often been (erroneously) overlapped with passive constructions, these latter being often chosen in English and in other languages as the closest rendering of autonomous forms. It is however worth reiterating that autonomous forms are by and large **demotional** and not promotional (cf. Stenson 1989), contrary to traditional passives; as a matter of fact, while the latter generally promote an object to subject function, the former just demote the subject without replacing it at all. Finally, looking at the information structural dimension of the sentences in which they occur, while passives are also functionally designed to topicalize the object (an operation that is facilitated by first making it the subject of the sentence), autonomous verbs solely downgrade the subject without promoting the object to topic function.

For these and other reasons, I do not believe passive constructions are an altogether transparent translation of autonomous verbs in other languages, since not only would this rendering be semantically misaligned with the underlying logical structure of autonomous sentences, but it would also potentially distort the representation the receiver may form of an event in her mind. Indeed, while with passives the participant role which the transitive subject is associated with is always part of the valency structure of the verb – although relegated to an adjunct status − with autonomous verbs such a participant cannot receive any surface encoding (since this would render the sentence ungrammatical). The repercussions this difference has does not merely obtain on the syntactic level, but should also be put down to the cognitive construal of the event itself, its unfolding and the participants involved in it.

Over the last twenty years or so, there have been several attempts at discussing possible counterevidence to classifying autonomous verbs as completely subjectless. Within more formalist frameworks, several authors have proposed to view the subject position as filled by empty categories such as pro, PRO or even expletive pronouns to account for specific syntactic behaviors displayed by these verb forms (cf. Stenson 1989; Bondaruk/Charzyńska-Wóicjk 2003; McCloskey 2007, a. o.). As for Irish, it will be argued that this hypothesis is only weakly tenable for a couple of specific syntactic tests, although the result they bring at in terms of the postulation of a subject of the autonomous verb may also receive an alternative explanation.

3.1 Subjecthood tests applied to Irish autonomous verbs

One of the tests showing that autonomous verbs do not behave like fully inflected verbs involves assessing their compatibility with emphatic markers (cf. Stenson 1989). In Irish, these markers endow a linguistic unit with informational salience (functioning, more or less, as focusing operators). They are generally agglutinated to pronouns, prepositional pronouns, common nouns and verbal endings (when they encode information on the grammatical number and person of the subject, as in synthetic verb forms). In (8), some examples are given.

Mothaítear rudaí 'Things are felt'). To avoid confusion in this sense, throughout this paper, I will use the term *subject* with reference to any argument role that is likely to receive this syntactic function in an autonomous sentence.

(8a) *An   tu-sa   an   rúnaí?*   (personal pronouns)
      INT   2SG-EMPH   DET   secretary
      'Are you the secretary?'

(8b) *Ba   leat-sa   Twitter   inniu   @ireland.   Oíche mhaith*   (prep. pronouns)
      Be.PST   with.you-EMPH   tweet   today   Ireland.   Night good
      'The tweet of Ireland was yours today. Good night'

(8c) *I   mo   theach-sa*   (common nouns)
      In   POSS.1SG   home-EMPH
      'To my place'

(8d) *Táim-se*   an   *rúnaí*⁵   (synthetic verbs)
      Be.1SG-EMPH   DET   secretary
      'I am the secretary (not you)'

The absence of person-number grammatical information (indicating the subject) in autonomous verbs hampers the agglutination of emphatic morphs, as shown in (9).

(9)   **Ceannaítear-sa   ticéid   don   seó*
      Buy.PRES.AUT-EMPH   ticket.PL   for.the   show
      'Tickets for the show are bought'

Another test that has been considered in the literature is the capability of autonomous verbs of binding reflexives, reciprocals and demonstratives. As shown in the occurrences below, while the binding of reflexives and demonstratives would not be possible, the same restriction does not seem to apply to reciprocals (cf. Stenson 1989: 384).

(10) **Buaileadh   seo   Ciarraí*
      Beat.AUT   this   Kerry

(11) **Buaileadh   féin* (REFL)   *Ciarraí*
      Beat.AUT   himself   Kerry

(12) *Chuirtí   geall   lena   chéile*
      Put.PST.AUT   bet   with   each other
      'People used to place bets on each other'

The observed discrepancy between reflexives and reciprocals could be couched as follows: while reflexives need to co-refer with an overt subject holding in the same syntactic domain, and the subject can either be singular or plural, the antecedent of a reciprocal can only be plural (cf. Heim/Lasnik/May 1991: 63). Thus, the fact that autonomous verbs are also interpreted as having a generic plural subject (cf. Nolan 2012) − often rendered in English as "people" or "they" − may allow co-reference with reciprocal pronouns. This analysis is also substantiated by the fact that when, in Irish, reciprocals have a singular antecedent, the most probable interpretation one derives is that this antecedent denotes a collective referent. For example, quoting McCloskey (2000), Bondaruk/Charzyńska-Wóicjk (2003: 334) remark that a sentence like (13) is considered acceptable to the extent that *clóca* ('cloak') is construed highlighting the different parts the item of clothing is made of.

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⁵ Following the point made by an anonymous reviewer, I deem it useful to clarify that, although such an example can be found in some uses of the Irish language, a more appropriate and standardwise variant is the one with the initial copula, i. e. *Is mise an rúnaí.*

(13) *D'fhill   Sáile   a   clóca   ar   a chéile*
      Fold.PST   Sally   POSS.3SG   cloak   on   each other
      'Sally folded her cloak up'

A further test that should prove the presence of a subject is the control of infinitives or gerunds. As compared to the trends observed so far for Irish, what results from these tests apparently runs counter to the issues raised above, in that autonomous verbs seem to allow the control of subjects of uninflected infinitive verbs (typically corresponding to verbal nouns in Irish). Indeed, Stenson (1989: 391) observes that a sentence like (14) – with *a bhailiú* 'collecting' taking the same implied subject as *Táthar ag iarraidh* 'they are trying' is perfectly licit in Irish.

(14) *Táthar   ag iarraidh* airgead   *a bhailiú*
      Be.PRES.AUT   trying   money   PRT collect.VN[6]
      'They are trying to collect money'

By the same token, in (15) *fhéadfaí* ('can') can control *dhéanamh* ('make').

(15) *Ní   fhéadfaí   feall   a   dhéanamh   air*
      NEG   can.COND.AUT   failure   PRT   make   on.him
      'One couldn't let him down'

With respect to this latter test, a few points are worth making. In my view, that the autonomous verb and the verbal noun (corresponding to an infinitive or a gerund in other languages) should be interpreted as having the same instigator participant is no striking evidence that a subject (although phonologically empty) is necessarily present. Rather, I take the stand that co-reference between the implied agent of the controlling verb and that of the controlled verb complies with a criterion of informational exhaustivity (in Gricean terms, we might say, in force of a Quantity Maxim, cf. Grice 1975). From this perspective, in the absence of cues to the contrary, the implied agent of the controlled verb (i. e. *a bhailiú* in (14) and *a dhéanamh* in (15)) is taken to be the same as the one implied in the event designated by the autonomous verb. On this account, it is reasonable to assume that it is not a syntactic reason – more precisely, a rule of syntactic control – that underpins co-reference between the two implied initiators, but a pragmatic constraint of informational completeness.[7]

Bondaruk/Charzyńska-Wóicjk (2003: 335) also suggest considering reference maintenance along a narrative chain as a parameter to test the presence of a subject with autonomous verbs. The authors regard the unexpressed subjects of the two autonomous verbs *stadadh* ('stop') and

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[6] Verbal Noun. These forms are a special kind of substantivised verb whose semantic and syntactic behavior shares the properties of both nouns and verbs. As outlined by Stenson (2008: 151), "their meaning is verbal but they can be used in parts of sentences where nouns usually appear, and they act like nouns grammatically: they have gender, genitive-case forms, sometimes plural forms, and when they are followed by another noun, it must be in the genitive case".

[7] With respect to this point, it should not be overlooked that, in some languages, control structures can also have non-coreferring subjects. As is known, in English the two sentences *I want to go to Mary's party* and *I want you to go to Mary's party* differ with respect to the subject of the infinitival clause, the dependent verb keeping an uninflected form. Analogous structures are also found in Italian; consider, for example, $\emptyset_i$ *Voglio* $\emptyset_i$ *lavorare a questo progetto* ('I want to work on this project') e $\emptyset_i$ *Voglio vedere te$_j$* $\emptyset_j$ *lavorare a questo progetto* ('I want to see you work on this subject'). So, these construction types do not constitute an incontrovertible testing ground to assess the presence of a subject constituent – whatever its surface realization – in a sentence.

scaoileadh ('release') in (16) to co-refer with the prepositional pronoun *againn* ('at-us'), and thus with a second-person plural subject.

(16) | *Fágadh* | *an* | *campa* | *ina* | *mbeirt* | *nuair a* | *bhí* | *smuitín* | *den* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Leave.PST.AUT | DET | camp | in | two | when | REL be.PST | part | of.the |

chnoc	*againn, do*	**stadadh**	*agus*	**Scaoileadh**
hill	at.us	PRT **stop**.PST.AUT	and	**release**.PST.AUT

amach	*na*	*líonta*
out	DET	nets

'One left the camp two by two, when we had reached a good part of the hill, one stopped and released the nets'.

It should be stressed, though, that the example discussed by the authors does not uncontrovertibly bear out the hypothesis that *stadadh* and *scaoileadh* necessarily have a second-plural subject, because co-reference here is also strongly conditional on the overall context of discourse. On a personal communication, a native speaker of Irish (Dublin area) suggested that an utterance like (16) is potentially ambiguous, in that a different subject may also be meant by the speaker depending on the more general context in which that utterance is produced. On this account, he also suggests considering the example in (17), in which the subject of the autonomous verb *cuireadh* ('start, begin') can well be a different one than *sé* ('he'), following the personal verb *thosaigh* ('begin').

(17) | *Nuair* | *a thosaigh* | *sé* | *ag* | *obair* | *sa* | *chomhlacht* | *nua* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| When | begin.PST | SOGG.1SG.M | at | work.VN | in.the | firm | new, |

cuireadh	*tús leis*	*an*	*tionscadal*	*sin*
begin.PST.AUT	with.it	DET	project	that.

When he started working in that firm, that project began.

Another interesting example of the same type is the one reported in (18), taken from a news article recently appeared on the RTé official website.

(18) | *Ghabh* | *na* | *Gardaí* | *fear* | *sna* | *caogaidí* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arrest.PST | DET | police | man.INDEF | in.his | fifties |

agus	*tugadh*	*é*	*chun*	*na*	*ospidéil*
and	take.AUT	OBJ.3SG	to	DET	hospital

'The police arrested a man and he was taken to hospital'
("Cailín óg a sádh i mBaile Átha Cliath inné fós an-dona tinn")

One could legitimately infer that the police arrested the man and took him to hospital, but this interpretation is no way the one possible and the sentence could well suit contexts in which someone other than the police took the man to hospital. The shift from a personal to an autonomous coding may just hinge on the writer's will to perspectivize the event in two different ways: one more **subject-oriented** (epitomized by the use of the personal form *gabh* 'catch, arrest'), in which the subject is construed as a prominent participant in the event described, the other one more **event-oriented**, in which it is the event to be construed as informationally more relevant than all other participants. The two verb forms can therefore co-exist in a coordinating construction without this implicating a corresponding co-reference between the two subjects.

On balance, being a discourse-based variable, I do not deem reference maintenance to be a conclusive and convincing piece of evidence to verify the presence of a subject with autonomous verbs.

Other accounts have sought to inquire informational properties of autonomous verbs considering the topicality degree of objects and omitted subjects (cf. Hansson 2004). Hansson (2004), for example, collected a corpus of autonomous and passive predicates noticing that implicit subjects of autonomous verbs are generally likely to be more topical, namely more accessible in the context of discourse. This estimation is in my view limited and does not properly account for diamesic differences, which is also another relevant parameter of the use of autonomous forms in oral and written communication. However, on the whole, the accessibility degree of omitted subjects does not seem to be a crucial factor for using autonomous rather than other personal constructions. By way of illustration, I report below occurrences of autonomous verbs taken from different text sources. The occurrences in (19) and (20) have been taken from the Introduction to the Irish translation of Tolkien's popular novel *The Hobbit* (in Irish *An Hóbad*, translated by Williams 2012: 8–9).

(19) *I nGàidhligh   na   hAlban   tugadh   an   focal   Lochlannach*
      In Gaelic   of   Scotland   borrow.PST.AUT   DET   word   Norse
      isteach mar   Ealbhar
      as   Ealbhar
      'In Scottish Gaelic, the Norse word was borrowed as Ealbhar'

(20) *Tugtar   treoir   foghra   íochta   ar chúl   na   leabhair*
      Give.AUT   key   pronunciation   lower   back   DET   book
      'A key to pronunciation is given at the end of the book'

Besides outlining the structure of the book, the introductory pages to the Irish version of the novel also provide stylistic details and clarifications on the rendering choices made by the translator. Some etymological aspects are also zoomed in on along with the reasons behind preferring certain lexical items to others to render specific English expressions in Irish. Example (19) is taken from a paragraph discussing how some Norse words entered Scottish Gaelic, which is the Goidelic variety with a very high number of Scandinavian loans. *Tugadh* is the past indicative autonomous form of *tugann* ('give'), rendered as "was borrowed" in the English translation. Now, it is quite intuitive that, talking about lexical loans, who took the foreign words were Scottish Gaelic speakers during their contact with Old Norse. Thus, the argument role of the unexpressed subject is quite accessible in this case and the use of an autonomous verb is plausibly suggestive of the relevance that the event of "borrowing" has in the described fact. By the same token, in (20) it can be quite easily evinced that who provided a key to pronunciation is the translator him/herself.

Accessibility of the subject appears to be less straightforward in the two excerpts in (21) and (22). (21) has been taken from a literary blog in which members usually discuss the content of books written in Irish (the home page of the blog details how participation in the discussion forum normally comes about), whereas (22) was picked from an article appeared on the official website of the Irish National Radio Broadcaster RTÉ (using both Gaelic and English).

(21)   ***Roghnaítear*** *leabhar nua gach mí agus bíonn deis ag na baill plé a dhéanamh ar an saothar*
        i bhfóram an tsuímh
        'A new book **is chosen** each month and club members have an opportunity to discuss this book
        in the website forum'

                                                                            (ClubLeabhar: Information)

(22)   ***Scaoileadh*** *roinnt drón le príomhchathair na Rúise, Moscó, i gcaitheamh na hoíche agus*
        tuairiscíodh beirt a bheith gortaithe agus damáiste a bheith déanta do roinnt foirgneamh dá
        mbarr. Tugadh le fios gur mionghortuithe a bhain don bheirt.
        'Some drones **were released** in the Russian capital, Moscow, during the night and it was re-
        ported that two people were injured and several buildings were damaged. It was revealed that
        the two suffered minor injuries.'

                                                        ("Dróin scaoilte le Moscó, ruathar eile fós ar Chív")

Let us first consider (21). From the wider text to which this excerpt belongs, it is not clear who
exactly chooses the book: a committee, a board, an expert, or whatever. The implicit subject
here is neither discourse nor situationally given; yet, the fact that it has not been mentioned
reveals that it is not relevant information for the purpose of the text as a whole. Who produced
the text was probably not willing to make the reader aware that someone selects the books to
be discussed in the forum, but rather that a selection itself takes place, and this is probably what
counts more for the aim of motivating Gaelic enthusiasts to use Irish to exchange opinions on
the contents of a book.

In the excerpt in (22), three autonomous verbs are used: *scaoileadh* ('release'), *tuairiscíodh*
('report') and *tugadh* ('reveal'). Now, whereas the perpetrator of the raid can be quite easily
associated with the Russian Confederation – as also the title of the article hints at –, who re-
vealed that two people were injured in the attack and who said that people should have left their
houses are unknown. Whether or not the writer possesses knowledge on the agents involved in
the described events cannot be evinced from the whole text, thus I assume that she opted for
autonomous forms to bring emphasis on the events themselves, and get the reader do likewise.

Another aspect that has been discussed about Irish autonomous morphology is that it cannot be
found with typically zerovalent verbs, such as weather predicates, as shown in (23) from Sten-
son (1989: 389).

(23)   **Cuireadh*   *sneachta*
        Put.PST.AUT   snow
        'It snowed'

Such a behavior resembles the one exhibited by impersonal verbs in Romance languages and,
notably, in constructions like the Italian *si mangia* ('one eats'), *si dorme* ('one sleeps'), the
Spanish *se estudia* ('one studies'), *se trabaja* ('one works') or the French *on voit* ('one sees')
or *on parle* ('one speaks'). etc. Also for these construction types it is not possible to appear with
weather predicates (**si piove* 'it is raining', **si nevica* 'it is snowing', **si grandina* 'it is hail-
ing').[8] On this account, also considering the ungrammatical output of (23), autonomous

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[8] The phenomenon of *si/se/on* impersonals in Romance is far more complex and cannot be accounted for exaust-
ively here. It is however worth remarking that, contrary to Irish autonomous forms, in Romance languages the

inflections may be expected to be found only with those verbs that semantically select an event "instigator" which is eventually removed from the valency pattern when autonomous morphology is applied to a verb. Against this backdrop, it would not be altogether debatable to just stick to the term **subjectless** (and not **agentless**) to refer to this verb category in contemporary Irish.

In sum, the considerations made so far constitute a valid grounding to anticipate what I believe might be a sound analysis of autonomous verbs that considers the non-negligible role played by information structure. Although the influence of this component on valency determination has already been inquired in previous studies (cf. for example, DuBois 1987; Lazard 1994; Goldberg 2006, a. o.), the idea that valency reduction (with the omission of both argument role and syntactic subject) of autonomous verbs might precisely stem from the information structural profile of the utterance in which such verbs are used has never been exhaustively tackled (apart from few, not systematically developed hints, cf. Nolan 2012). Capitalizing on Goldberg's discourse-driven criterion of argument omission, the following section will seek to put forth the view that autonomous verbs indeed are verbs without a subject and that this absence is above all pragmatically driven.

4   Information structure and valency selection

The idea that valency patterns strongly interact with utterances' information structure and with how sentences fit the overall context of the discourse was already discussed by previous scholars such as DuBois (1987) and Goldberg (2006), among others. DuBois remarked that for each verb form there is a Preferred Argument Structure which depends on how this structure is used in discourse, and thus with the pragmatic function participant roles receive in a communicative act. Along similar lines, Goldberg (2006: 427) pointed out that "most verbs readily appear in more than one argument structure pattern", and which pattern is selected depends on the particular information packaging displayed by the different syntactic units of the sentence. For the discussion to be developed, I will mostly consider the topic-focus opposition and its interaction with the valency structure of autonomous verbs.

Building on more discourse-functional accounts of information structure units, (cf. Lambrecht 1994; Cresti 2000; Lombardi Vallauri 2009, a. o.), I take topic to mean information (whether given or new) endowed with a lower communicative weight and that is generally encoded as less relevant to the communicative task at hand; on the contrary, focus refers to information endowed with a greater communicative weight – in that it fulfils the speaker's communicative goal − and conveys the illocutionary force of the utterance (cf. Cresti 2000). The strategies of linguistic encoding of topic and focus units may vary from language to language (cf. Zimmermann/Féry 2009; Ozerov 2018) and often hinge on the mode of transmission (written or spoken) of a linguistic message. In orality, prosody is the most remarkable sign of informational prominence, with intonational peaks typically marking focused words or phrases. Conversely, in written language, fronting (e. g. *THIS TABLE I want, not that one*)[9], cleft sentences (e. g. *It is THIS TABLE that I want*) or focusing particles (e. g. **Also THIS TABLE is made of wood**) may

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impersonal pronouns are actually assigned the function of subject and thus they cannot be regarded as all the way subjectless (cf. Egerland 2003).

[9] Throughout the paper, focused syntactic units are marked with capital letters.

mark a sentence unit as focus, while topic is sometimes coded through syntactic dislocations (such as the well-known clitic-left dislocation in Romance languages (*Questo libro, l'ho comprato nella libreria del mio vicino*, cf. Cecchetto 1999; Arregi 2003), aboutness-expressions such as *as far as X is concerned*, *as for X...*, as well as word order, among other strategies. Phonologically, topic is likely to exhibit a less prominent contour although with slight variations depending on the particular function it performs in discourse (e. g. contrastive topics tend to have more prominent peaks than, for example, aboutness and given topics, cf. Frascarelli/Hinterhölzl 2007). It is believed that sentences in all languages are constructed in compliance with a universal pragmatic principle of old-to-new progression by which, in pragmatically neutral sentences, old elements are often left-positioned, while new elements are tendentially right-positioned. How the scope of this principle differs for head-initial and head-final languages is not straightforward to nail down, as it also inevitably interacts with the underlying mental representation of a sentence's meaning, which may not be the same for speakers of head-initial and those of head-final languages (cf. Tanaka/Branigan/Pickering 2010; Arai 2012).

As I will seek to outline in the following, autonomous verbs are a special case of argument omission possibly hinging on the major emphasis brought on the event. This analysis moves from a line of reasoning Goldberg (2006: 435) put forth for object-patients discussing examples such as those in (24).

(24a)   The chef-in-training chopped and diced all afternoon
(24b)   Tigers only kill at night
(24c)   Pat gave and gave, but Chris just took and took

She observes that with transitive verbs like *dice*, *chop*, *give* and *take*, object omission in (a) through (c) is motivated by the stronger emphasis put on the action, iconically encoded through lexical repetition. On closer inspection, what the speaker intends here to inform the interlocutor about is not **what** has been chopped, diced, killed or given, but rather that these very **events** took place, and with a certain insistence. The speaker's preferred perspective in uttering these sentences is thus less centered on the participants involved in the described events.

According to Goldberg (2006: 435), it is precisely this focus on the event that makes the explicit mention of a patient less necessary. She formulates this stance in the following tenet, which she calls "Principle of Omission under Low Discourse Prominence":

> Omission of the patient argument is made possible when the patient argument is construed to be de-emphasized in the discourse vis-à-vis the action. That is, omission is possible when the patient argument is not focal in the discourse, and the action is particularly emphasized.
>
> (Goldberg 2006: 435)

It follows from this that argument roles which are new **must** be expressed, while those roles which are given can be omitted, because they can be easily recovered. Goldberg (2006: 436) notices that this is often the case of syntactic objects when predicates are emphasized, as in the examples in (24), but we can assume that the same condition also obtains for subjects. However, she also notes that whether emphasizing a predicate makes it **preferable** or **possible** to omit the object is not clear, since this evaluation cannot be made without considering the wider model of discourse.

Another non-negligible point to consider is that argument structure does not always reflect the exact number of all participants involved in an event. Some events may in fact entail actants not matching with any selected argument role at the valency level. Consider (25) as an example.

(25)   I wrote him a letter

Now, it goes without saying that the action of writing in the example provided is expected to be performed by means of an instrument, be it a pen, a colour, a keyboard, or the like. Yet, this (instrumental) participant is not necessarily subsumed in the argument structure of *write* in (25). In fact, the Instrument is an implied argument, as it logically participates in the event, even if it is not syntactically encoded. Such an omission can be thought to comply with Goldberg's principle described above; thus, since in (25) the Instrument is neither focal nor salient, it can well be omitted in the representation of the event. This standpoint becomes even more convincing if a plausible discourse context is posited. As a matter of fact, (25) could be uttered as an answer to (i) *What did you do?* or (ii) *What did you do to him?*; conversely, it could not be a felicitous reply to (iv) *How did you write him a letter?*, or (v) *What did you write him a letter with?* As it can be deduced from their overall informational articulation, such questions are designed to elicit information on the *instrument* used to write the letter, which is expected to be focused in the corresponding reply. Thus, (26) would be a more acceptable answer in this case.

(26)   I wrote him a letter with a pen

If pronounced orally, *with a pen* would be expected to receive phonological prominence, indexing that it is a required and non-omissible piece of information. By the same token, the verb *cut* in *John cuts the cake* makes the involvement of a knife definitely more predictable than any other piece of cutlery, although no mention of the knife is made in the sentence. With respect to cases like these, Ježek (2005) speaks about "default" arguments, namely arguments implied in the meaning of the verb.[10] Typically, implicit arguments are made explicit when they are modified, as in (27), or when they are associated with non-predictable referents, as in (28).

(27)   I cut the cake with a **sharp** knife
(28)   I cut the cake with a **ladle**

In sum, the idea that some actants may not be selected at the valency level is not so weird after all, given that the linguistic encoding of an event is almost always a matter of perspective and emphasis brought on one or the other portion of an event.

It should also be remarked that absence of an argument from the valency structure of a verb does not necessarily involve postulating its absence from the concrete unfolding of the event (but only from the particular construal the speaker forms of that event in her mind). In such a case, the agent can be said to be "implied", although it is not selected among the obligatory arguments of the verb. As argued for Goldberg's examples above, the missing argument can be plausibly reconstructed based on contextually available information or on knowledge already shared by interactants (in other words, their **common ground**, cf. Stalnaker 2002). In other cases, as seen in the Irish examples, an agent (or any other instigator of an event) may simply

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[10] For the moment being, I will not take the risk of classifying unexpressed subjects of autonomous verbs as correlating with default arguments proper; I will thus limit myself to just assuming that both default and syntactically unexpressed arguments are implied in a sentence.

be unknown while not making the sentence less comprehensible. In fact, building on the examples seen before, the use of sentences with autonomous verbs – with superficially non-expressed agents – should be regarded as appropriate to the extent that the speaker or writer is willing to bring the receiver's attention to the event. One may wonder why would focus on the event lead to resort to non-agreeing verbs such as autonomous forms of the Irish type. The interplay of subject-verb agreement and the information structure of a sentence is not all the way unknown in the world's languages. For example, in Oromo (Cushitic family), the verb loses gender agreement features when the subject is not topical (cf. Clamons et al. 1999: 60). Lazard (1994) noticed a similar pattern in Somali, in which the verb appears to agree with the subject only when it is topical, whereas in cases of focused verbs, agreement is even optional. On this account, autonomous verb forms can be thought to have developed this particular morphological appearance (with no agreeing features) to fulfil the information structural function of focusing the event, rather than its participants.

In this respect, I believe that the reason why a syntactic subject is not expressed is not because no agent is involved in the event described, but rather because an agent, or any other participant that can potentially fill the subject position is simply **not selected** at the valency level.

Besides the already discussed comparison with Romance languages, there have been attempts at paralleling autonomous verbs with other types of impersonal constructions such as sentences with (plural) generic subjects (cf. Nolan 2012, among others). In Irish such a sentence type would have the form in (29).

(29) *Rinne   duine   éigin   cáca*
       Make.PST person some   cake.INDEF
       'Someone made a cake'

The autonomous version of this sentence would sound like (30).

(30) *Rinneadh   cáca*
       Make.PST.AUT   cake.INDEF
       'A cake is made'

It should be noticed, however, that although apparently similar at the logico-propositional level, (29) and (30) should not be treated alike, since while in (29) the verb *rinne* is used as bivalent (with an agent and a patient selected as obligatory roles), in (30) the same verb is used as monovalent (with only the patient being selected at the valency level). The agent would in this case be an implied, yet not obligatory, argument. But the difference between the two sentences also concerns their pragmatic profile; as a matter of fact, while the generic subject (*duine éigin*) in (29) may fill, in given discourse contexts, the topic function, the same analysis could not be envisaged for (30), in which no surface subject (whether semantically definite or not) can become "what the verb predicates something about" (Reinhart 1981).

On a closer look, what autonomous verbs seem to do in a sentence is report an event in a way that is quite similar to what thetic sentences do. As is known, the thetic vs. categorial distinction dates back to a long tradition of studies (cf. Brentano 1874/1924; Kuroda 1972; Sasse 1987), yet it clearly captures the pragmatic effects of certain types of logical propositions. Capitalizing on Kuroda's seminal outlines (cf. Kuroda 1972), categorial sentences (or categorial judgments) are generally composed of a logical predicate stating something about a logical subject;

contrariwise, thetic sentences (or thetic judgements) are outlined as subjectless sentences, with the scope of the predication being the event itself. In most languages, thetic judgments often have the form of all-new sentences in which the reporting of a particular eventuality is the purpose of the speaker's message. Presentative constructions like *There is a spider under the table* or *It is a luxurious car* display this logico-semantic structure. In a way, sentences with autonomous verbs could be deemed as paralleling such construction types and, specifically, *there*-presentative structures, where to be "presented" as new, here, is not a referent (as in *There is a cat*), but an event, as in *There is smoking in the room*. Thus, instead of drawing the receiver's attention to a particular referent (or its existence), with sentences like *There is dancing here* or *There is too much smoking*, among others, the receiver is informed on the fact that a particular event is taking place, rather than on who triggered it. In fact, the surface expression of the agent with *there*-constructions like those above would be perceived as weakly acceptable (??*There is smoking by my brother here*), precisely because, in such cases, it is not the speaker's intention to inform the interlocutor about **who** did something but about **what** is being done.[11]

The functional similarity between sentences with autonomous forms and thetic statements may find further backing in the fact that contexts eliciting focus on a single word or constituent generally requires using a cleft construction. So, for example, with a context question such as that in (31a), eliciting all new information in the answer, an answer like (31b) would be judged as acceptable. On the contrary, with a context question like (32a), an Irish speaker would generally opt for the copula construction in (32b), which is typically used in Irish as a common focusing construction.[12]

(31a) *Cad atá ag tarlú anseo?*
        'What is happening here?'
(31b) *Ullmhaítear   cácaí   anseo*
        Prepare.AUT   cake.PL   here
        'Cakes are prepared here'
(32a) *Cad atá a ullmhú anseo?*
        What is being prepared here?'
(32b) *Is   cácaí   atá   á n- ullmhú   anseo*
        COP   cake.PL REL   prepare.PROGR here
        'It's cakes that are being prepared'

Correspondingly, a sentence like (32b) would be weakly acceptable in a context like (31a) since, as is known, a cleft-sentence is functionally designed to fit contexts in which a sentence unit is

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[11] The actual nature of the categorical/thetic distinction has often been addressed as problematic and, based on the particular level of analysis being considered, the boundary between the two types of proposition has turned out to be even hazier than commonly thought (cf. Lewis 2001). Lewis (2001), for example, maintains that thetic statements are categorical sentences with "abstract" (logical) subjects, notably subjects that can be reconstructed on pragmatics grounds.

[12] Differently from what is observed in other Indoeuropean languages (for example, in the Romance family), in Irish, prosody has a much less prominent role in distinguishing between informationally more and less salient syntactic units (cf. O'Reilly/Dorn/Chasaide 2010). Although intonational prominence is sometimes used to focus a single word or phrase (ex. *Sin é MO leabhar* 'This is MY book', quoted from Cotter 1994: 141), this strategy is generally perceived as a "pragmatic calque" from English, while more conservative native speakers would usually resort to copula constructions such as those in (32b).

unknown (the one being fronted after the copula) while the other unit recalls already shared knowledge.

5　　Final remarks

As till now argued grounds for setting forth a twofold consideration on (a) the interplay of information structure and argument structure, on the one hand, and (b) on the need to recast the structural and functional nature of Irish autonomous verbs in the current debate, on the other.

With respect to (a), and in line with Goldberg and DuBois, it can overall be agreed upon that the information structure level of an utterance is not so detached from the valency dimension – as the pattern sketched in (1) would suggest. Rather, as displayed in the pattern in (2), information structure could be thought to "mediate" between argument structure and the determination of syntactic roles. This in-between position accounts for the role information units such as topic and focus play in perspectivizing event construal in one or the other way (either bringing focus to one of the participants, to the verb iself or to other entities involved in the event described). Based on the informational prominence set for each unit of the sentence, also their necessary or optional realization is determined accordingly. On this account, since a sentence first complies with specific communicative aims, we should expect speakers to first reckon how informational hierarchies are supposed to determine the number of argument roles needed to be expressed and, based on their micropragmatic profile, what their structural properties in the utterance are expected to be. On this account, sentence production could be predicted to entail an application of the pattern in (2) rather than that in (1).

(1)　*Argument structure > Syntactic roles >* **Information structure**
(2)　*Argument structure >* **Information structure** *> Syntactic roles*

The succession reported in (2) entails that once a particular valency pattern is established, its mapping onto syntactic structure meets constraints of informational hierarchization. Put otherwise, whether or not an argument role receives a syntactic encoding as subject, object or the like first hinges on the pragmatic function (topic or focus) such a role is planned to fulfil in the utterance. Therefore, in such a dynamics, information structure operates as a **filter** between semantics and syntax and, precisely, between the construal of participants' role in the event and how they are linguistically packaged at the surface level.

It should also be highlighted that, contrary to what certain lines of reasoning put forth on the universality of argument structure, it should not be taken as uncontrovertible truth that verbs have the same argument structures in all languages and in all usage contexts (cf. the discussion in Harman 1977 on this matter). Precisely because argument structure is a variable of the micropragmatic profile of an utterance (cf. Lazard 1994), what follows from this is that valency saturation is mostly conditional upon the constraints imposed by the overall informational architecture of the foregoing discourse. And, as is clearly demonstrated by a wealth of typological evidence, argument structure is also largely determined by several other parameters of the verbal category, from transitivity to Aktionsart, among others (cf. Hopper/Thompson 1980). Irish itself offers an interesting case of valency fluctuation based on the progressive vs. accomplished nature of an event. Notably, while progressive events are generally coded with verbal nouns (i. e. nominalized verbs) taking a prepositional object (typically a genitive one), verbs denoting

accomplished events have canonical accusative objects. Consider the pair of examples below (cf. Noonan 1994).

(33) *Bhí   Liam   ag bualadh   Sheáin*
      Be.PST   Liam   hit.PROGR   *Seán*.GEN
      'Liam was hitting Seán'

(34) *Bhuail   Liam   Seán*
      Hit.PST   Liam   *Seán*
      'Liam hit Seán'

Differently from what happens in other languages where objects maintain their surface appearance (consider, e. g. the Italian *Gianni ha colpito lui* "Gianni hit him" and *Gianni sta colpendo lui* "Gianni is hitting him" with the masculine pronoun *lui* "him" not changing form in the two sentences) independently of the aspectual properties of the event, objects in Irish sentences like (33) and (34) do not receive the same syntactic encoding. This also largely depends on the use of a verbal noun (corresponding to a gerund or an infinitive in other languages) which calls for a non-accusative form of the object. The use of a verbal noun entails an interpretation of the event as a reified state of affairs; put another way, the event is presented as if it were a more time-stable entity rather than a dynamic process. On semiotic grounds, this is an iconic strategy to express events which are weakly transitive, because their emphasis is not on the final result but on the state of affairs itself. Hopper/Thompson (1980: 262) describe evidence from other languages such as Finnish in which verbs may take accusative partitive objects based on the aspectuality of the verb.

(35) *Liikemies   kirjoitti   kirjeen   valiokunnalle.*
      businessman   wrote   letter (ACC)   committee-to
      'The businessman wrote a letter to the committee.'

(36) *Liikemies   kirjoitti   kirjettd   valiokunnalle*
      businessman   wrote   letter (PART)   committee-to
      'The businessman was writing a letter to the committee'

In the case of Irish progressives, the need to have a genitive-marked object is correlated with an underlying semantic representation of the event as "the act of Liam's hitting is with Seán". Alternatively, Seán could be interpreted as a locative, in which case the process of hitting would be "at him".[13]

On balance, if valency patterns appear to be so fluctuant and contingent on the various semantic features of a verb, besides its denotational meaning, it would not be so weird to acknowledge pragmatically-based variations of valency patterns as well, which are expected to be even more common given that utterances are normally produced within a context of discourse, and are thus tailored to its communicative dynamism and informational architecture, this latter being moulded on interlocutors' informative goals.

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[13] In her work on the expression of agents in early Irish and Welsh, Müller (1996) remarks that agents preceded by the preposition *le* ('with') frequently allowed interpreting the whole agentive prepositional phrase as denoting a locative relation.

5.1   More on the divide between autonomous and passive structures

I have already argued that the emphasis so far brought on merely structural parameters has led some scholars to postulate the existence of phonologically empty subjects with autonomous verbs – assuming these forms to constitute no exception to the Extended Projection Principle − when subjectless sentences clearly exist and serve specific pragmatic purposes in everyday interactions. We have seen that, to some extent, the non acceptability of overtly mentioning subjects makes autonomous sentences less akin to passives (where the demoted subject can optionally be expressed in the form of a prepositional phrase) and more similar to *there*-presentatives in which the overt expression of *by*-agents (as in *There's working *by my brother* corresponding to the Irish autonomous sentence *Rinneadh* (AUT form of "do") *an obair *ag mo dheartháir* ('The work is done by my brother') is generally perceived as weakly appropriate.

Another interesting factor to consider is that, in a pragmatically neutral passive sentence, an expressed *by*-agent would most probably be interpreted as focal, in that it would be more likely associated with novel information. As hinted at before, one would utter a sentence like (37) if her intention were to inform the interlocutor also about **who** triggered the action, with a growing informativity degree towards the agentive phrase *by my brother.*

(37)   The work has been done by my brother

The same micropragmatic pattern would instead clash with the information packaging of autonomous sentences where, as argued so far, higher informativity would be expected to fall on the verb, which reduces the likelihood that other syntactic units might be put in the foreground. Such a constraint may have constituted the toehold for the formation of autonomous verb forms out of agentless passive sentences, which used to be quite common in Irish (and in many other Indoeuropean languages; cf. Müller 1996: 141: "The agentive passive is on the whole a rare construction").

This hypothesis has already been set forth by Ó Sé (2006) who reports that in Early Modern Irish agent phrases introduced by the prepositions *ag* ('at'), *le* ('with') and *ó* ('from') were gradually eliminated from the passive sentence (cf. Greene 1979: 134, "Since the Early Modern period, the passive, with the agent marked by *ag*, *le* or *ó* has been eliminated from the language. The inflected forms are now impersonal and no agent can be introduced"). See the examples in (38)−(39):

(38)   *Ro*   *benait*   *na*   *cluic*   *ac na clēirchib*
       PRT   strike.PST.PASS.PL   the   bells   by the clerics
       'The bells were rung by the clerics'
                                      (ACL iii, 225.23, quoted from Ó Sé 2006: 85)
(39)   *Gur*   *trasgradh*   *Cú Chulainn* *lé Coin Raoi*
       so-that   knock.PST.PASS   C.C.   by C.R.
       'So that Cú Chulainn was knocked down by Cii Raoi'
                                      (S. Chéit. 11,11 34f., quoted from Ó Sé (2006: 85)

In time, these forms eventually turned into uninflected forms and became overall incompatible with the surface expression of agents. In more recent Modern Irish, the same sentences would thus appear as in (40).[14]

(40a) *Buaileadh na cloig*
       'The bells were rung'
(40b) *Treascraíodh Cú Chulainn*
       'Cú Chulainn was knocked down'

Now, going back to how information structure may have impinged on the overt mentioning of agent complement phrases, it can thus be taken as a possible scenario that the need of emphasizing the event may have made it preferable to remove other potential "competitors" to focus function. This view gains strength if delineated against the backdrop of Keenan's analysis (cf. Keenan 1985; Keenan/Dryer 2007) of agentless passives (such as *The chocolate cake was made*) as the basic (or primary) passive type, whereas passives such as *The chocolate cake was made by my mother* would be the secondary type. From this standpoint, agentless passives could be regarded as less marked and with a focus typically falling on the verb.[15] Conversely, the expression of an agent would more likely shift the focus on the agent itself. That agented and agentless passives constitute two pragmatically-different passive types also clearly emerges from the comparison between (41) and (42).

(41) A: What happened?
      B1: The chocolate cake was made
      B2: ??The chocolate cake was made by my mother
(42) A: Who made the chocolate cake?
      B1: ??The chocolate cake was made
      B2: The chocolate cake was made by my mother

The different pragmatic suitability of the agented and agentless passive to the two types of contexts is quite striking. Notably, while the agentless passive appears to be more "felicitous" as a reply to the question in (41) in which, as it can be noticed, the question is designed to elicit an answer focusing the main event (and, in general, the whole proposition), the same passive type would sound somewhat marginal as a reaction to the question in (42), in which the information about **who** initiated the event is elicited as new information. Agentless passives thus seem to be pragmatically more neutral than sentences with agented passives in that the former can perform as all-new (thetic) sentences, similarly to the characterization proposed for autonomous verbs. On the contrary, agented passives appear to be more natural as replies to questions about who initiated the event at issue, thus receiving an interpretation as narrow foci (cf. Lambrecht 1994). Since a potentially focal overt agent would have competed with the event-emphasizing function of autonomous verbs, in order to avoid having more than one syntactic unit under the scope of focus (and thus as potentially classifiable as new information, cf. Chafe 1987; Givón 1975) agents may have gradually taken a backseat thereby eventually becoming incompatible with these verb types.

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[14] Ó Sé (2006) rightfully points out that the diachronic relation with earlier passives has nothing to do with the use of passives as English translations of Irish autonomous verbs.

[15] That agentless passives were much more common than agented ones is also backed up by evidence from earlier phases of a number of languages, especially in the Indoeuropean family (cf. Jamison 1979).

This analysis is clearly only a suggested viewpoint on what may have led autonomous forms develop out of certain types of passive structures, and it definitely calls for a stronger and wider basis of evidence of the uses that both passive sentences and autonomous verbs had throughout the centuries. A closer look at this further aspect would indeed relevantly contribute to what we know to date about autonomous verbs and their functional properties in Irish as well as in other Celtic languages. The lines of reasoning outlined in this paper would also certainly benefit from bringing home to the diachronic path(s) that led to the formation of autonomous morphology in Irish and how, in time, this competed with other types of impersonal constructions (for some interpretive proposals in this sense, I refer the reader to Graver 2010, 2011). On the whole, a more extensive corpus-based work, with data from both spoken and written language uses, might considerably help better delineating the phenomenon of subjectless autonomous inflections in Irish also with a more integrated and multi-layered perspective on their function and distribution in different contexts of use.

6   Conclusion

Irish autonomous verbs epitomize an interesting case of semantic-pragmatic interface. In this work, I have proposed to view these verb forms as subjectless (with no need of postulating phonologically silent categories such as pro, PRO or expletives) and with a reduced valency pattern. Since autonomous inflections in Irish are functionally designed to emphasise the event rather than who initiated it, it is suggested that it is this pragmatic (information structural) profile that requires the omission of agentive participants in the valency structure of the autonomous verbs together with the syntactic function of the subject they associate with. A sound way of recasting these verb types is by correlating them to thetic (mostly presentative-like) sentences in which the scope of predication is the event itself, as there is no logical subject (i. e. a topic) the verb predicates something about. The arguments developed in this paper substantiate and corroborate the view that not only is argument structure not a constant feature of all uses of a verb in a language but that this level of verbal semantics is also strongly pragmatically-oriented, in the sense that different informational articulations may drive the selection of obligatory argument roles and their surface expression in a sentence. In the case of Irish autonomous verbs, information structure may have played a role in their diachronic formation out of certain types of passive constructions from Early Modern Irish onwards.

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List of abbreviations

PST	Past
AUT	Autonomous
PRES	Present
PL	Plural
FUT	Future
INT	Interrogative
2SG	Second person singular
1SG	First person singular
EMPH	Emphatic
DET	Determinant
POSS	Possessive
COND	Conditional
GEN	Genitive
PRT	Preterite
NEG	Negation/Negative particle
VN	Verbal noun
PROGR	Progressive
OBJ	Object
ACC	Accusative
PART	Partitive
PASS	Passive