

Clefts in Irish and the Syntactic Articulation of Discourse Structure

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1 PURPOSES

- To examine cleft constructions in Irish with respect to how syntactic structure and discourse structure interact,
- Establish that that interaction is richer and more complex than one might initially think –
- Specifically: to identify three very distinct interpretive patterns that emerge, in different discourse contexts, from a single syntactic pattern – that illustrated in the section which follows,
- To describe those patterns and take some initial steps towards analysis and theoretical integration.

SYNTACTIC BASICS

What is a ‘cleft’? (see Ó Siadhail (1989: pp 236-239), Mac Cana & Baoill (1990), McCloskey (2001), Nolan (2012: 211-2) and especially Maki & Ó Baoill (2017: Chap. 8))

- a bi-clausal structure (there are two independent tense and polarity domains)
- consisting of a finite clause embedded within a higher verbless clause (a so-called ‘copula’ clause)
- which has as its predicate a phrase extracted from the lower clause,
- a phrase which we can call the ‘pivot’ of the cleft – XP in the schematic structure shown in (1).

(1) [COP _[PIVOT] XP [CP _[REL] C [... — ...]]]

- where C is the ‘relative complementizer’ (an mhír dhíreach choibhneasta)
- and consequently there is a ‘gap’ in the lower clause (indicated by —), the base position of the fronted pivot.

SOME TYPICAL EXAMPLES

- (2) a. Ba iad [XP na bádóirí] [CP a d’imigh —] agus [XP Fungie] [CP a d’fhan — .] XP IS A NOMINAL PHRASE
b. Ní [XP orm] [CP a bhí sí ag breathnú —], ach thríom XP IS A PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE
c. Ní [XP óg] [CP a tá sé ag éirí —]. XP IS AN ADJECTIVAL PHRASE
d. Dar leis gur [XP ag titim as a chéile leis an chodladh] [CP a bhí sí —]. XP IS A PROGRESSIVE PHRASE

Many languages have such structures, but Irish is perhaps unusual in two ways – in the frequency with which clefts are used and in the range of distinct syntactic categories which may appear in the pivot position.

SOME TERMINOLOGY

- *cleft clause*: the entire structure
- *pivot*: the phrase fronted into the post-copular position (XP of (1))
- *base clause*: the clause (CP of (1)) out of which the pivot is fronted

So in the case of (2d):

- the ‘cleft clause’ is *gur ag titim as a chéile leis an chodladh a bhí sí*;
- the ‘pivot’ is *ag titim as a chéile leis an chodladh*;
- the ‘base clause’ is *bhí sí ag titim as a chéile leis an chodladh*

2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A SYNTACTIC QUESTION:

What determines which phrase in the base clause is chosen to be the pivot (XP of (1)) and raised into the position immediately following the copula?

INTERPRETIVE QUESTIONS:

What is the role of such cleft sentences in the dynamics of a discourse? In particular:

- In what kinds of discourse states is it appropriate to use a cleft?
- How is the evolving state of the discourse changed when a speaker or writer chooses to deploy a cleft?

SOURCES OF DATA:

- Naturally occurring examples from the large data-base described in the Appendix. This data-set includes 1620 examples of clefts of various types from a broad range of dialects and idiolects;
- Consultation with native speaker advisors. I owe, in this, a special debt of gratitude to Róise Ní Bhaoill, Lillis Ó Laoire, Pádraic Ó Ciardha, Seosaimhín Ní Bheaglaoich, Caitlín Nic Niallais and Dónall Ó Baoill.

3 INTERPRETIVE PROFILE – FIRST TRY

HYPOTHESIS:

Clefts express contrastive focus on the pivot (see Ó Siadhail (1989: p. 237), McCloskey (2001: p. 92), Nolan (2012: p. 211-2)). This hypothesis answers the syntactic question and the interpretive questions simultaneously:

- ▷ the pivot (XP of (1)) is chosen for fronting because it is contrastively focused
- ▷ clefts characteristically appear in contexts in which a range of alternatives is salient and
- ▷ the cleft is an assertion that just one of those alternative propositions is true

And it is clearly correct for some cases – those in (2) above, for instance, or those in (3):

- (3) a. An \emptyset tusa a scríobh é seo?
C.Q COP.PRES YOU C.REL WRITE.PAST it DEMON
 ‘Is it you that wrote this?’ (as opposed to someone else) LL 255
- b. Do Cholm Tom Mhóir a tá trua againne
for C.REL be.PRES pity at-us
 ‘It’s Colm Tom Mhóir that we pity.’ (not anyone else) LL 137
- c. Ní \emptyset confach a bhí sé ach dáigh
C.NEG.FIN COP.PRES bad-tempered C.REL be.PAST he but stubborn
 ‘It’s not bad-tempered he was, but stubborn.’ MO 23
- d. ní gorm a bhí siad ach geal bán
COP.NEG blue C.REL be.PAST they but bright white
 ‘It’s not blue they were but bright white.’ OMGS 259
- e. Is ag éirí óg a tá tú.
COP.PRES PROG become.VN young C.REL be.PRES you
 ‘It’s getting young you are.’ (not old) ICFF 143

BUT:

- Even for such cases, the pivot XP is often not itself the contrastively focused element; rather it *contains* that focus as a proper subpart. See examples (3e), (2b) above.
- Examples of this type represent just 271 of the 1620 examples in our data-set. That is, this hypothesis accounts for just 16.7% of the data.
- Call these, then, TYPE ONE clefts, with the implication that we might find TYPE TWO clefts and ...

4 TYPE TWO – EXCLAMATIVE CLEFTS

The syntactic structure of (1) is used; but the phrase in pivot position is not focused.

ULSTER

- (4) a. ní raibh sí sásta. 'S í féin nach raibh.
C.NEG.FIN be.PAST she satisfied COP.PRES herself C.NEG be.PAST
'She wasn't happy. She absolutely was not.' D 248
- b. 'An bhfuil tú beo?' ... 'Is mé féin a tá.'
C.Q be.PRES YOU alive COP.PRES myself C.REL be.PRES
'Are you alive?' 'I certainly am!' SDMSN 73
- c. Is tú a bhí do chodladh ... Tá mé do chrathadh le chúig mhoimeinte.
COP.PRES YOU C.REL be.PAST your sleeping be.PRES I your shake.VN with five minute
'You were so (soundly) asleep! I've been shaking you for five minutes.' TM 288

CONNACHT

- (5) a. Nach orm a bheadh an bród an fáinne sin a thaisbeaint di!
C.NEG on-me C.REL be.COND the pride the ring DEMON show.VN to-her
'How proudly I would show that ring to her!' IAE 222
- b. 'Ó, choisreacan Chríost orainn, nach tú a chuaigh i gcontúirt.' 'Chuas, a Pheige.'
C.NEG YOU C.REL go.PAST in danger go.PAST.S1 .VOC
'Lord bless us and save us, you went into such danger!' 'I did, Peg.' MABAT 67
- c. 'Nach é a tá ard,' a smaoinigh sí.
C.NEG him C.REL be.PRES tall C.REL think.PAST she
'How tall he is,' she thought. LOFRS 73

MUNSTER

- (6) a. cheannaíomar caid leathair. Nach sinne a bhain súp as.
buy.PAST.P1 football leather.GEN C.NEG US C.REL took.PAST soup out-of-it
'we bought a leather football. We got so much enjoyment out of it.' MTF 13
- b. Nach leis a bhí an seans ná raibh beirthe ag an saol ar eireaball air.
C.NEG with-him C.REL be.PAST the luck C.NEG be.PAST caught by the life on tail on-him
'Wasn't he very fortunate that life hadn't caught him by the tail?' LG 393
- c. Is iad a bhí fáilteach ar gach aon slí
COP.PRES them C.REL be.PAST welcoming on every one way
'They were so welcoming in every way.' TUAIR 27-01-22

AN INITIAL (NEGATIVE) OBSERVATION

- In TYPE TWO clefts, the pivot (in post-copula position) is in no sense contrastively focused.

WEATHER (AND OTHER) SEMANTICALLY EMPTY PRONOUNS

The clearest evidence that the pivot in TYPE TWO clefts is neutral or un-marked in interpretive terms comes from cases like those in (7a) and (7b):

- (7) a. Nach é a tá te! ... 'tá doineann air!
'How hot it is! There's a storm brewing.'
lit: 'It's it that's hot.' ATFS 189

- b. ‘Tá sé fuar,’ ars an seandúine. ‘Is é a tá,’ arsa Séimidh, ‘fuar, fuar.’
 be.PRES it cold QUOT the old-man COP.PRES it C.REL be.PRES QUOT cold cold
 ‘It’s cold,’ said the old man. ‘It certainly is,’ said Séimidh, ‘cold, cold.’
lit: ‘It’s it that is.’

CO 248

Similarly the place-holder pronouns (‘pleonastic’ or ‘expletive’ or ‘proleptic’ pronouns) which associate with clauses. So from the base clause in (8a) we may form the cleft clause in (8b):

- (8) a. Tá sé doiligh déileáil leat.
 be.PRES it hard deal.VN with-you
 ‘It’s hard to deal with you.’
 b. Ó, a Dhia, is é a tá doiligh déileáil leat!
 ‘My God, it’s so hard to deal with you!’
lit: ‘It’s it that’s hard to deal with you.’

MAG 29

PROPERTIES OF TYPE TWO CLEFTS

- The pivot of a TYPE TWO cleft is neither focused nor emphasized (see also Mac Cana (1973: 110))
- Rather, TYPE TWO clefts express emphatic assertions.
- This is why (9) is not a redundant repetition. The first utterance is a plain assertion; the second utterance of the same propositional content (in the form of a TYPE TWO cleft) adds intensity or forcefulness.

- (9) Tuigimse sin go maith. Is mé féin a thuigeas.
 understand.PRES.S1 that well COP.PRES ME REFL C understand.PRES
 ‘I well understand that. I absolutely do.’
lit: ‘It’s me that does.’

ST 100

NEW CHALLENGES

- (i) What does it mean to call an assertion ‘emphatic’ or ‘forceful’?
- (ii) If the pivot is not focused, on what basis is it chosen for fronting to the post-copular position? For the TYPE ONE clefts, there was a simple answer to that question – the element fronted out of the base clause into pivot position is the focused element. That answer is not available to us for the TYPE TWO clefts.

AN INITIAL STEP

TYPE TWO clefts express *Verum Focus* – a special kind of contrastive focus in which what is contrasted is the truth or falsity of a proposition.

- ▷ identified originally by Tilman Höhle (1992) for German and much discussed since then for many languages.
- ▷ analysed by Wilder (2013), Samko (2014, 2016), McCloskey (2017), Bennett et al. (2019), and Goodhue (2022) as reflecting, at least in part, focus-marking on the expression of polarity, positive or negative.
- ▷ It has been observed since the very beginning of work on verum focus that one of its effects is to ‘intensify’ the force of an assertion (Höhle (1992), Richter (1993), Romero & Han (2004), Gutzmann & Miró (2011), Wilder (2013), Taniguchi (2017), Gutzmann et al. (2020), Goodhue (2022)). Theories differ about why this should be so, but there ARE theories.
- ▷ Realized in English (and in many other European languages) by way of a focal accent on an auxiliary verb (see (10)).

- (10) a. Why didn’t you do the dishes? I **DID** do the dishes.
 b. Why didn’t you do the dishes? I **DID**!

A STEP FURTHER

- ▷ The recognition that TYPE TWO clefts express *Verum Focus* represents a gain in understanding.
- ▷ But it is not yet enough; for it does not yet capture a central aspect of the interpretation of such clefts:
- ▷ namely that they often in addition convey that some gradable property holds to an extreme degree
- ▷ Example (7b) does not just assert the truth of the proposition ‘It’s cold.’ It also conveys that the cold was extreme.

- (11) CONTEXT: *A parish priest visits a parishioner to deliver some good news. He finds the man asleep but is so eager to deliver the good news that he tries to waken him. He finds it difficult – the man is in a deep sleep.*
 Is tú a bhí ’do chodladh ... Tá mé do chrathadh le chúig mhoimeinte.
 ‘You were so (soundly) asleep! I’ve been shaking you for five minutes.’
lit: ‘It’s you that were asleep.’ TM 288
- (12) a. Nach air a bhí an deifre!
 ‘He was in such a hurry!’
lit: ‘Wasn’t it on him that the hurry was?’ OMGS 44
- b. is orm a bhí an cuthach feirge
 ‘I was so angry.’
lit: ‘It was on me that there was a fury of anger.’ AA 202
- c. thánas ar gheansaí peile, geansaí de chuid na Mumhan. Nach orm a bhí an t-áthas.
 ‘I found a football jersey – a Munster jersey. I was so happy!’
lit: ‘Wasn’t it on me that there was joy!’ MTF 21
- d. Nach mé a chrothnuigh tú!
 ‘How I missed you!’
lit: ‘Isn’t it me that missed you!’ ATFS 85

FURTHER: In contexts of translation (from English or from French), translators frequently render exclamative clauses in the original by way of TYPE TWO clefts

- (13) a. Teas! Is muid a bhéas rósta sa teampall inniu!
 ‘Such heat! How we shall broil in church today!’
lit: ‘It’s us that will be roasted in church today.’ ATFS 9
- b. ‘Nach é a tá ard,’ a smaoinigh sí.
 ‘How tall he is,’ she thought
lit: ‘Isn’t it him that’s tall.’ LOFRS 73
- c. nach orm a bhí an t-áthas iad fheiceáil!
 ‘Oh how glad I was to see them.’
lit: ‘Wasn’t it on me that there was gladness to see them!’ IAE 83
- d. ba í a bhí ag siubhal go fadálach
 ‘She was walking so slowly.’
lit: ‘Wasn’t it her that was walking slowly.’ MO 210

THE SYNTACTICIAN’S QUESTION

- ▷ In virtue of what property is a phrase selected (in the base clause) to be the pivot in a TYPE TWO cleft?
- ▷ The most syntactically prominent major constituent of the clause:
 - the subject if there is one (see (13d), (13b), (13a), (12d), (11))
 - the prepositional phrase in a base clause of the form: Verb—Nominal—Prepositional Phrase (as in (13c), (12c), (12b), (12a) ...)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Type Two clefts in contemporary Irish are characterized by:

- the same syntactic frame (that in (1)) used for contrastive focus clefts (TYPE ONE)
- they express *Verum Focus* – contrastive focus on the polarity of the clause (true or false)
- frequently (in 85% of examples) express a ‘scalar implicature’, conveying that some gradable property (heat, cold, sadness, joy, pride, sorrow, anger ...) holds to an extreme degree – one that is beyond normal expectation
- raising of the most prominent major constituent of the base clause into pivot position

VERUM FOCUS AND THE SCALAR IMPLICATURE

In clauses which lack a gradable expression whose interpretation includes an implicit degree, the *Verum Focus* interpretation emerges alone and un-obscured:

- (14) a. Fan anseo ag ithe sméar, ar seisean. Is mé nach bhfanann, arsa Caol an Iarainn.
 ‘Wait here eating blackberries.’ ‘I certainly will not,’ said Caol an Iarainn.
lit: ‘It’s me what won’t.’ SNAF 51
- b. ‘Má chuala tú riamh iomrádh ar Ros na bhFeannóg.’ ... ‘Nach mé féin a chualaidh. ...’
 ‘If you ever heard of Ros na bhFeannóg.’ ‘I certainly have.’
lit: ‘It’s myself that has.’ BRD 268
- c. ‘An aithneochthá lorg láimhe d’athara?’ arsa Mac Daeid. ‘Is mé féin a d’aithneochadh,’ ar seisean.
 ‘Would you recognize your father’s work?’ said McDaid. ‘I certainly would,’ he said.
lit: ‘It’s me that would.’ SDMSN 76
- d. ‘caithfidh mise lóistín na h-oíche a fháil go maidin.’ ‘Is tú féin a gheobhas.’
 ‘I must get lodging until morning.’ ‘You absolutely will.’ SDMSN 70

5 TYPE THREE CLEFTS – INFORMATIONAL FOCUS

TYPE THREE clefts exploit the syntactic frame in (1) but do not involve contrastive focus of any kind. They are extremely productive in all contemporary dialects. An illustrative example is given in (15) (simplified from an actual example):

- (15) CONTEXT: *A group of old friends had arranged to meet. As time goes by, one of them has not appeared. People begin to wonder or worry about why this might be so. The implicit question is then made explicit:*
 A: Cá bhfuil Siobhán?
 B: Níl fhios agam. B’fhéidir gur taisme a bhain daoithi.
- (16) a. CONTEXT: *A protagonist who is long overdue arrives home in a state of great distress. His wife asks:*
 ‘Caidé a tháinig ort?’ arsa an bhean. ‘Na saighdiúirí a sgaoil liom, thiar ar an Dartán.’
 ‘What happened to you?’ asked the woman. ‘The soldiers shot at me over by Dartán.’
lit: ‘It was the soldiers that shot at me over by Dartán’ TM 209
- b. CONTEXT: *A discussion of the funeral of a neighbour who has recently died.*
 Ní dheachaigh tú aon phísín den bhóthar de chuideacht le Cóil bocht.? Ní dheachas, a Bheartla Mhóir.
 Bróga nua atá agam agus tá siad ag luí ar mo chosa.
 ‘You didn’t go any way along the road to keep company with poor Cóil?’ ‘I didn’t, Beartla. I have some new shoes and they’re bothering my feet.’
lit: ‘It’s new shoes that I have and they’re bothering my feet.’ AN 289
- c. CONTEXT: *Discussion of a son who has emigrated and who has stopped writing home. The question under discussion is why he might have suddenly stopped.*
 Taom tinnis a bhuaíl é, ní foláir.
 ‘It must be that he’s fallen sick.’
lit: ‘It’s a bout of illness that must have struck him.’ BM 94

- d. CONTEXT: *A telegram arrives for a young man working as a migrant farm-worker in Scotland. His friends sense that it brings bad news*

A athair a bhí tinn agus bhí siad ag iarraidh air a theacht 'na bhaile go gasta.

'His father was ill and they were asking him to come home quickly.'

lit: 'It was his father that was sick.'

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CHARACTERISTICS OF TYPE THREE CLEFTS

- They use the same syntactic frame as do all the other subtypes – that in (1).
- They do not invoke contrastive focus (see also Mac Cana (1973: 106))
- They address a question that is either explicit ((15), (16a)) or implicit ((16b), (16c), or (16d)) in the discourse context - a QUD ('question under discussion') in the sense of Craige Roberts (2012).
- They address that question by asserting an all-new proposition, one that is not given in the discourse.
- That is, they express what has variously been called *broad focus*, or *sentence focus*, or *informational focus*.

A DIAGNOSTIC

The standard diagnostic for informational focus is to ask: can the relevant structure be used to answer an out-of-the-blue question like 'What's going on?'

- (17) CONTEXT: *Two friends walking along the docks in Galway. They notice a commotion on the quayside and ask a passing stranger what's going on.*

Corp a tógadh as an bhfarraige ar ball beag – fear as Conamara.

'There was a body lifted out of the sea not long ago – a man from Conamara.'

lit: 'It's a body that was lifted out of the sea not long ago.'

AA 132

PRODUCTIVITY

- There are 183 clear examples of this type in our data-set,
- representing 11.2% of all the data,
- slightly less numerous than either TYPE ONE (contrastive focus) clefts – 16.7%; or TYPE TWO (exclamative) clefts – 17.0%.

THE SYNTACTICIAN'S QUESTION

- ▷ In virtue of what property is a phrase selected to be the pivot in a TYPE THREE cleft?

TENTATIVE ANSWER:

The most prominent major constituent of the base clause which is not given will be raised to pivot position. That will in general be the subject, but:

- (18) a. Tá tú gearrtha? Tá; mo chos a bhuaill mé faoi théad.

'You're cut? 'Yes, I caught mt foot on a rope.

lit: 'It's my foot that I caught on a rope.'

AA 131

- b. Tá mo chos nimhneach. ... Péire de bhróga úra a chuir mé orm inné.

'My foot hurts. ... I put on a pair of new shoes yesterday.'

lit: 'It's a pair of new shoes that I put on yesterday.'

BRD 343

- c. théigheadh sé ar mire fosta. B'fhéidir gur mias a chaithfeadh sé isteach sa ghráta

'He would go mad as well. Maybe he'd throw a dish into the fire-grate.'

lit: 'Maybe it would be a dish that he would throw into the grate.'

ATFS 25

PATTERN: An object may be moved to pivot position over a subject which is given.

6 SUMMARY AND OVERVIEW

- ▷ The unitary syntactic pattern in (1) supports a range of possible interpretations – at least three.
- ▷ It is at least possible that all involve the presence of focus (of various types) in the base clause of (1)
- ▷ INTERPRETATION
 - TYPE ONE clefts are those in which contrastive focus marking falls on one subconstituent of the base clause
 - TYPE TWO clefts are those in which the base clause hosts Verum Focus – contrastive focus on the expression of polarity within the clause
 - TYPE THREE clefts are those in which the base clause hosts sentential or informational focus
- ▷ SYNTAX
 - In TYPE ONE clefts the contrastively focused subconstituent of the base clause is raised to the pivot position
 - In TYPE TWO clefts the most prominent subconstituent of the base clause is raised to pivot position. This is an entirely formal requirement with no implications for the information-structure status of the raised element.
 - In TYPE THREE clefts the most prominent subconstituent of the base clause which is not given/familiar is raised to pivot position.
- ▷ Needless to say, these conclusions raise as many questions as they answer.
- ▷ And the arithmetically astute will have noticed that our three cleft-types collectively account for just 44.9% of the available data.

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APPENDIX – SOURCES OF DATA

The empirical material for this talk is drawn from a data-base of naturally occurring examples built up over several decades of observation.

- The material of that data-base is drawn principally from published texts. Alongside books, newspaper articles and the like, however, many examples are drawn from audio sources such as radio broadcasts, podcasts, or spoken word CD’s; many are also drawn from participant observation – of informal conversation and email exchanges.
- All of the major dialects, including a number now extinct, are represented, the oldest from the final decades of the 19th century, the newest contemporary, representing a span of 140 years or so.
- 150 distinct idiolects are represented.
- At the time of writing, the data-base contains just short of 26,000 annotated examples, coded for some 350 properties (formal and interpretive).
- It is searchable by syntactic feature and by dialect and, crucially, for the vast majority of cases the total context in which an examples was used is recoverable.
- Material has been extracted from around 350 texts in addition to the various audio sources, suggesting an overall ‘corpus-size’ of something like 24 million words.
- For most of the phenomena of concern, the goal has been to identify and record every example of the relevant type. Some useful observations about relative frequency then become possible as well as some deductions about the factors which drive speakers’ choices, when choices must be made.

Work with native speaker consultants has also been a crucial source of evidence.

APPENDIX: SOURCES OF EXAMPLES

- AA: *Athaoibhneas*, Pádhraic Óg Ó Conaire, 1959, Sáirséal agus Dill
- ATFS: *Ag Teacht Fríd an tSeagal*, Helen Mathers, trans. Seosamh Mac Grianna, 1932, An Gúm
- AN: *Athnuachan*, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, 1995, Coiscéim
- B: *Bricriu*, An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire, 1915/2018. Risteárd Mac Annraoi, Corcaigh
- BM: *Bullaí Mhártain*, Síle Ní Chéileachair agus Donncha Ó Céilleachair, 1969, Sáirséal agus Dill
- BRD: *Bean Ruadh de Dhálach*, Séamas Ó Grianna, 1966, Oifig an tSoláthair
- CO: *Caisleáin Óir*, Séamas Ó Grianna, 1924, Oifig an tSoláthair
- D: *An Draoidín*, Séamas Ó Grianna, 1959, Oifig an tSoláthair
- IAE: *In Aimsir Emmet*, (In Emmet's Days) trans. Colm Ó Gaora, 1937, Oifig Díolta Foillseacháin Rialtais. Dublin
- ICFF: *Iascaire na gCiabh-Fholt Fionn*, Fionn Mac Cumhaill,
- LG: *Le Gealaigh*, Pádraig Ó Cíobháin, 1991, Coiscéim
- LL: *Lámh Láidir*, Joe Steve Ó Neachtain, 2005, Cló Iar-Chonnachta
- LOFRS: *Liam Ó Flaithearta - Rogha Scéalta*. trans. Micheál Ó Conghaile, 2020, Cló Iar-Chonnacht
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- TM: *Tarnгаireacht Mhiseoige*, Séamas Ó Grianna, 1958, Oifig an tSoláthair
- TUAIR: *Tuairisc*