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An adjectival construction indicating lesser degree in Early Modern Irish
(Short title: Lesser degree in Early Modern Irish)¹

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ABSTRACT: In English, lesser degree is expressed by a periphrastic construction: in the comparative, adverbial ‘less’ precedes the adjective (‘less successful’); in the superlative, ‘least’ takes the place of ‘less’ (‘least successful’). This note draws attention to an adjectival construction in Late Middle and Early Modern Irish – the use of comparative/superlative forms of non-stable compounds in *neamh-* – and argues that this construction was used to convey lesser degree.

(1) *ní mó as ceart iná críonna an gníomh agá mbí cūram na neithe as neamhuaisle* 7 *do-ní neamshuim do na neithibh as uaisle* (Ó Súilleabháin 1972, ll 956-8).

(1) occurs in the Early Modern Irish translation (AD 1650) of Savonarola’s *Triumphus Crucis*. It renders Latin *Neque vero recta aut sapiens est illa actio, quæ ignobiliora procurat, et nobiliora prorsus omittit*. We could translate the Irish as ‘Neither is the deed which serves the more ignoble things and ignores the more noble things right or proper’. The Irish captures the sense of the Latin well, though nothing in the Irish matches Latin *prorsus*. The translation of *ignobiliora*, accusative plural neuter of the comparative of *ignobilis* ‘ignoble’, into Irish as *na neithe as neamhuaisle* is noteworthy. Latin *ignobilis* is rendered elsewhere in the text as *anuasal* (l. 4416). Comparative *anuaisle* does occur elsewhere in the text, though in that instance it forms part of an alliterative doublet and does not correspond to a particular word in the Latin text: *neithe as ísle 7 as anuaisle iná é féin* ‘things that are lower and more ignoble than himself’ for Latin (acc. pl.) *inferiora* ‘lesser things’ (l. 6774). Why did the translator, Bonaventura Ó Conchobhair, opt for superlative *neamhuaisle* (with the force of a comparative) in one instance and *anuaisle* in another? Is this an instance of arbitrary variation in the use of negative prefixes or is there a semantic distinction at play? *Anuasal* is the expected negative of *uasal* ‘noble’. This is not the only instance in EModIr

¹ I am grateful to Stephen Stacey for first discussing this note with me. My sincere thanks to Damian McManus, Liam Breatnach and the anonymous reader for their comments and corrections. I alone am responsible for the errors and omissions of this paper.

where the expected negative prefix is replaced with *neamh-* in a comparative/superlative adjective. Compare

(2) *An croidhe ad chiú ar n-a tholladh / go dul orm ní fheadamar / gur neamh-chruaidhe ná cur cloch / ar cur fhear-chuaine Ultach* (McKenna 1921, quatrain 35 = *DiD* poem 92.35).

These words are put in the mouth of Cú Chulainn by the distinguished late-sixteenth, early seventeenth-century Bardic poet, Eochaidh Ó hEódhasa. Having been wounded while defending the Ulaidh against the assaults of the united forces of the island of Ireland, Ó hEódhasa describes how Cú Chulainn becomes aware of his own mortality while gazing upon his own gored chest. McKenna translates, ‘“This heart I now see wounded, till this happened to me, I thought no softer than a heap of stone” said the warrior of the host of the Ulaidh’. *Éagcruaidh* ‘infirm, weak’ is the expected negative of *cruaidh* ‘hard’, yet here *neamh-* takes the place of *é-*. It could, of course, be argued that this substitution was made for metrical purposes: *neamhchruaidhe* rhymes with *fhearchuaine*. We should not, however, ignore the possibility that there may be a semantic difference between *éagcruaidh* and *neamhchruaidh* simply because the example occurs in a metrical text.

If there is a semantic difference between *anuasal* and *neamhuasal* and between *éagcruaidh* and *neamhchruaidh*, how is this to be defined? The negative prefix *an-* in *anuasal* and *é-* which, when combined with *cruaidh*, gives *éagcruaidh* are both outcomes of what is historically the same negative prefix, cognate with Latin *in-*, Germanic *un-* etc. (see *GOI* §§869-72). As Thurneysen observes of Old Irish, these forms ‘are chiefly used to change adjectives and nouns formed from adjectives into the corresponding negatives; e.g. *anfoirbhetu* ‘imperfection’, from *anfoirbthe* ‘imperfect’. They are prefixed to other nouns when the resulting compound denotes a concept distinct from that of the simplex; e.g. *anfius* ‘ignorance’ [...], *ancretem* and *am(a)ires* ‘unbelief’, *anfochell* ‘carelessness’, *ancride* ‘injustice’ (to *críde* ‘heart’), *a(i)mles* ‘disadvantage’ ’ (*GOI* §869). The negative prefix *neb-/neph-* (EModIr *neamh-*) has a different force. It ‘is used to negative nouns and adjectives, particularly in nonce formations [...] The resulting compound as a rule denotes, not an independent concept, but merely the negation of the simplex. Hence the difference between this prefix and *an-*, etc., corresponds roughly to that between English ‘not, non-’ and ‘un-, in-’ ’ (*GOI* §874).² The distinction drawn by Thurneysen for OIr can be said to hold in general for EModIr also.

2 Thurneysen does note, however, instances where *neb-/nep-* is used where *an-* etc. might have been expected (*GOI* §874).

For a survey of negative prefixes in Modern Irish, see Ó Labhraí 2004. My thanks to the anonymous reader for this reference.

In other words, stable *anuasal* would be best rendered into English as ‘ignoble’, while the non-stable formation *neamhuasal* should properly be translated ‘non-noble’ or ‘not noble’; similarly, *éagcruaidh* would best be rendered ‘infirm, weak’ etc., while *neamhchruaidh* could be translated ‘not hard’. Bearing this in mind, we can distinguish a subtle but important semantic distinction in the use of negative prefixes in comparative adjectival constructions such as those in (1) and (2). In (1), we have the comparative/superlative of the non-stable negative *neamhuasal* ‘not noble’; to capture the force of ‘more not noble’, we must, of course, render this into English as ‘less noble’, i.e. we have to do here with lesser rather than greater degree: ‘neither is the deed which serves the **less noble** things and which ignores the more noble things right or wise’. While the comparative of *anuasal* has approximately the same meaning, the semantic force is somewhat different; this can be captured in English by comparing ‘more ignoble’ ((*ní*) *as anuaisle*) and ‘less noble’ ((*ní*) *as neamhuaisle*). ‘More ignoble’ is on a scale of greater degree of ignobility; ‘less noble’ is on a scale of lesser degree of nobility. Similarly in (2), bearing in mind that *neamhchruaidh* is a non-stable formation, the translation of comparative *neamhchruaidhe* as ‘softer’ by McKenna is unsatisfactory. *Neamhchruaidh* is not a perfect synonym for *bog* ‘soft’; it is rather a highly marked negative corresponding to English ‘not hard’. In the comparative, we have then ‘more not hard’, i.e. ‘less hard’. As such, we should emend McKenna’s translation to read ‘I did not know that it was **less hard** than a heap of stones’, i.e. ‘I did not know that it was not as hard as stone’. In contrast, the force of (*ní*) *as éagcruaidhe* could be rendered by ‘more fragile’ or a similar translation. To rephrase rather pedantically, the comparative form of *éagcruaidh* indicates a greater degree of the state of being *éagcruaidh*; in contrast, the comparative of *neamh-* + *cruaidh* indicates a greater degree of the negation of the simplex *cruaidh*, i.e. lesser degree.

The English language has two methods of forming adjectival comparisons. The first is morphological and generally involves adding the suffix *-er* (for the superlative, *-est*) to a given adjective (e.g. ‘big’, ‘bigger’, ‘biggest’), though irregular forms also occur (e.g. ‘good’, ‘better’, ‘best’). The second method for forming comparisons is a periphrastic construction in which the adverbs ‘more’ or ‘most’ precede the adjective (‘successful’, ‘more successful’, ‘the most successful’). To express lesser degree, the latter construction is used, but the adverbs ‘less’ and ‘least’ take the place of their antonyms ‘more’ and ‘most’ (‘successful’, ‘less successful’, ‘the least successful’). While the statements ‘John is less successful than Mary’ and ‘Mary is more successful than John’ overlap semantically, pragmatically they express two different perspectives on the same relation: in the former sentence we are dealing with a negative scale (lesser degree), while in the latter we have a scale of greater degree. In no stage of the Irish language is a periphrastic construction corresponding to English ‘more successful’, ‘the most successful’ available, nor does

Irish have a construction which corresponds syntactically to its negative equivalent, ‘less successful’, ‘the least successful’.³ In contrast, Welsh has developed a comparative/superlative construction like English ‘more X than’ (*mwy X na*), ‘less X than’ (*llai X na*), ‘the most X’ (*mwyaf X*), ‘the least X’ (*lleiaf X*) (see Thomas 1992, 316-17).⁴ In the use of comparative forms of non-stable formations in *neamh-*, as in (1) and (2) above, however, EModIr could, in fact, express lesser degree on the adjective itself. In the following examples from EModIr, I suggest that a translation of ‘less X than’ is to be preferred to a translation that would indicate greater degree.⁵

(3) is from the Arthurian tale *Eachtra Mhelóra*. Orlando enters the Forest of Wonders to find a wonder to report to King Arthur, who is obliged to listen to a marvellous story while eating his meal. Orlando encounters a ship made of glass sailing on the forest’s canopy.

(3) *Do bhaoi Orlando seal ag féchain na luinge amhlaidh sin agus adubhairt: ‘Measaim go ccaithfeadh Rí an Domhain a phruinn re sgéal is neamhiongantaighe iná soin. Gidh eadh féachfad an fhoraois seal oile.’*

‘Orlando was a while looking at the ship in this way and he said, “I suspect that the King of the World would eat his dinner while listening to a **less remarkable** story than that [i.e. an account of the remarkable ship]. Nonetheless I will look around the forest a bit longer” ’ (Mhac an tSaoi 1946, ll 251-5).

The comparative of *neamh-* + *iongantach* ‘remarkable’ should be understood, as I have translated above, as ‘less remarkable’.⁶

3 For phrases of the type, *an fear is mó cáil / is lú cáil* (lit. ‘the man whose fame is greatest / least’) see below.

4 I am grateful to Professor Barry Lewis for discussing this with me.

5 All translations of material published without a rendering into English are my own. The relevant words in both the original text and the corresponding translation are given in bold. Where appropriate, I indicate when the form under discussion in a metrical example alliterates (° indicates the words participating in alliteration) or participates in rhyme (the rhyming words are given in brackets following a verse citation). As has already been observed in relation to (2), it should, of course, be borne in mind that metrical exigencies may have contributed to the choice of a particular poet to employ the construction I am discussing here. However, the prose examples confirm that this construction was available in non-metrical contexts. It is to be expected that poets would avail of the possibilities available to them in the language to fulfil the requirements of a particular metre while also conveying their desired message. It should also be remembered, however, that the adjectives in *neamh-* discussed here are non-stable formations marked as negative. While a poet might, for example, employ *ní as neamhthláithe* ‘less weak’ in more or less the same sense as *ní as treise* ‘stronger’, the former wording is highly marked and, at least formally, negative. Given the literary skill exhibited by the medieval Irish poet in handling language and metre, it would, it seems to me, be unwise to dismiss or overlook the semantic nuance of a particular construction simply because that construction also fulfils a metrical function or several metrical functions in a given quatrain.

6 Cf. Orlando’s response to another wonder slightly later in the text: *creidim go ndearna Cing Airtíúir a bhíadh uair éigin re hiongnadh is lugha ná a bhfaca mé*, ‘I believe that King Arthur has had his dinner before while listening to an account of a lesser wonder than that which I have seen’ (Mhac an tSaoi 1946, ll 264-5). I take *neimhiongantaighe* to be a non-stable formation here and for the reasons stated above translate as ‘less remarkable’. To my knowledge, *neimhiongantach* is not a stable formation in EModIr. In Modern Irish, however, *neamhiontach*

In (4), the poet addresses God, to whom he commits his soul.

(4) *Fēch oram ēisd rém thiomna
suil rabhar °ní as °neimhiodhna
as ī ar ttiomna arna tegar
nī as iodhna dom fhoirc(h)edal. (thiomna : neimhiodhna)*

‘Look upon me, hear my testament before I become even **less pure**; my testament having been drawn up is the purest part of my teaching’ (ABM poem 302.5).

Neimhiodhna is the comparative of *neamh-* + *iodhan* ‘pure’. Contrast the stable negative *eisiodhan* (see, for example, *DiD* poem 60.22).

In (5), we should read ‘**less expensive**’ rather than McKenna’s ‘cheaper’, as *neamhdhaoire* is the comparative of *neamh-* + *daor* ‘expensive’ in a non-stable formation.

(5) *Ní fhuigheadh Cormac mhac Cēin
- córuide in éigse dh’óighréir –
tráth as °neamhdhaoire ná a-°nos
na deaghlaoidhe ó chách cheandchos. (neamhdhaoire : deaghlaoidhe)*

‘Cormac son of Cian would never find – the more fitting that poesy should be fully required – a time in which the stately poems he buys from all would be cheaper than now’ (McKenna 1951, poem 4.13).

In (6), *neimhthreise* represents the comparative of *neamh-* + *tréan* ‘strong’, a non-stable formation.

(6) *Bruid Bhalair go n-a bhráithribh
Tuatha Dé do dhíoláithrigh;
dar lat is °neimhthreise a-°niogh
na beithre-se Mac Míleadh. (neimhthreise : beithre-se)*

is sufficiently common to have a separate headword in Ó Dónaill 1977.

‘Tuatha Dé overthrew the bondage of Balar and his kinsmen; one would think that these champions of the Irish are **less strong** today [than Tuatha Dé then]’ (O’Rahilly 1927, poem 54, ll 57-60).

In (7), we have the comparative of the non-stable formation *neamh-* + *díreach* ‘straight, proper’. As such we must emend Nic Cárthaigh’s translation of the second half-quatrain of this citation (which, in any event, does not capture that the adjective is comparative) to read ‘may it [likewise] be the case now for our good king that the judgement he will give is not **less proper**’.

(7) *Mar do chuaidh don ríoghraidh riamh
briathra a bhfileadh ’s a bhfáithchiall,
go ndeach dar ndeighríghne a-nos,
nach **neimhdhírghe** an bhreath bhéaras. (ndeighríghne : neimhdhírghe)*

‘As the words of their poets and their prophetic wisdom have ever served kings, may they [likewise] serve our good king, so that the judgement that he will pass is not unrighteous’ (Nic Cárthaigh 2013, quatrain 12).

In (8), the poet praises Eibhilín, daughter of Mac Suibhne and wife of An Calbhach Ruadh Ó Domhnaill. The comparative of *neamh-* and *docht* (‘resolute’ here?) indicates lesser degree here. I would emend McKernan’s translation of the second half-quatrain to read ‘their step is no **less resolute** [than the Í Dhomhnaill] [either] on account of criticism of [their] gift-giving [or] on account of [their excessive] hospitality (?)’.

(8) *Nós na Suibhneach gan dul di,
tug Eibhilín dá hairé,
ní **neamhdhoichte** céim a gcorp,
ar bhéim dearlaigthe, ar dhaon[n]acht. (neamhdhoichte : dearlaigthe)*

‘Eibhilín took to her notice the custom of the Mac Sweeneys which does not escape her (not less firm is the prowess of their bodies) for giving, for humanity’ (McKernan 1946-7, quatrain 60).

In (9), I would translate *neamhdhoichte*, comparative of *neamh-* + *docht* in the sense of ‘tight-fisted’ as ‘**less tight-fisted**’ rather than ‘more generous’.

(9) *Saoiltear lē a los ar dhearlaigh,
an Toichthe,⁷ gur thighearnaigh;
na dearloicthe budh díol tnúidh,
bíodh gur ^o**neamhdhoichte** an ^oNádúir. (dearloicthe : *neamhdhoichte*)*

‘In consequence of all she has bestowed, Fortune thinks she has prevailed; the gifts would be a ground for envy although Nature was more generous’ (Breatnach 1977-8, quatrain 23).

In (10), I follow the textual notes to *ABM* in reading MS *nemhaide* as *neamhmóide*, i.e. *neamh-* + *móide* (comparative *mó* + *-de*).

(10) *Do-gheibh eite ó gach ēan díobh
ar mbeith lán d’fhuacht is d’i(o)mshníomh
dál na fennōige ó fuair céim
níor nemhaide [a] huail eiséin. (feannóige : *neamhmóide*)*

‘[The crow], having been afflicted by cold and hardship, got a feather from every one of those birds; as for the crow, not **less great** was its pride as a result of receiving this step up in life’ (*ABM* poem 384.22).

All of the above examples are of the comparative (‘[less] adjective’). The following are examples of the superlative (‘the least [adjective]’). In (11), we have the superlative of *neamh-* + *conchair* ‘fond of dogs’.

(11) *ōir is amhlaidh do bhī Feargus Findliath ina dhuine do ba **neamhchonchuire** ar domhan, ōir ní lamhthaī cú do thaphairt a n-ēan-toigh fris.*

‘for it so happened that Fearghus Finnliath was the person who was the **least fond of dogs** on earth, for it was not permitted even to bring a dog into the same house as him’ (Joynt 1936, ll 746-9).

7 A slip for *toicthe*?

In (12), I would emend Knott’s translation of *beart is neimhghlioca fa nimh* from ‘a deed the most foolish under heaven’ to ‘the **least clever** deed under heaven’.⁸ This quatrain occurs in an apologue: the words quoted here are spoken by a young man to the king-elect in a country where the king rules for only a year before being exiled to an uninhabited island for the rest of his life; the moral of the apologue is that short-term gain should not be preferred to long-term prosperity. *Neimhghlioca* is the superlative of *neamh-* + *glic* ‘clever’; contrast the stable negative *aimhghlic* (*DiD* poem 36.5). (In addition, for internal rhyme, read *eighreata* for *oighreata* in the fourth line of the quatrain.)

(12) “*Do-roinneadh leat go nua anois –
an chloich is uime fhuarois –
beart is °neimhghlioca fa °nimh,
a dhearc oighreata fhaoilidh.*” (*neimhghlioca : eighreata*)

‘ “By thee, now – therefore hast thou received the stone – has been committed a deed the most foolish under heaven, O glistening, kindly eye” ’ (*TD* poem 22a.44).

Similarly, in (13), I would emend Knott’s translation of *rí ba neamhthláithe fa nimh* as ‘most fearless king of heaven’ to ‘the **least weak** king under heaven’. With *neamhthláith* (superlative *neamhthláithe*) (< *neamh-* + *tláith* ‘weak’) contrast the stable negative *éadtláith* (see, for example, *DiD* poem 87.15).

(13) *Conchobhar mhac Aodha arís
ní raibhe a dhreach mar dhoinnghrís –
rí ba °neamhthláithe fa °nimh –
acht trí leathráithe ar Luighnibh.* (*neamhthláithe : leathráithe*)

‘Then Conchobhar, son of Aodh, most fearless king under heaven, face like a glowing ember, ruled Leyney but three quarters of a year’ (*TD* poem 32.47).

8 Note that in all stages of the Irish language the article may be omitted where the definite noun in question is the head of a restrictive relative clause (see Uhlich 2013).

In (14), I translate superlative *neamhaoibhne* (< *neamh-* + *aoibhinn* ‘pleasant’; for the stable negative *anaoibhinn*, see McKenna 1947, poem 4.21) as ‘least pleasant’. The poem in question, *Díol fuatha flaitheas Éireann* ‘The kingship of Ireland is something to be despised’, composed by Eochaidh Ó hEódhasa for Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill, describes the kingship of Ireland as an onerous burden.

(14) *Mór rígh ’ga raibhe an innsi*⁹
riam do tuit ’na timchill-si
rīge as °nemháobhne fa °nimh
*tíre gealáobhne Gáoidhil. (nemháobhne : gealáobhne)*¹⁰

‘Many were the earlier kings who possessed the island who fell on its account; the bright, pleasant lands of Gaoidheal are the **least pleasant** kingship on earth’ (*ABM* poem 173.3).

In (15), I would emend McKenna’s translation of the second half-quatrain to read ‘God’s gifts are closer to me than the material gifts of the person who is **least close-fisted** about anything’, i.e. ‘God is more generous than the most generous earthly king’.¹¹

(15) *Geall re maoinibh moladh Dé;*
más ar mhaoinibh moltar rí
faicse dhamh dearloicthe Dé,
cradh an té as °neamhdhoichte um °ní. (neamhdhoichte : dearloicthe)

‘Singing God’s praise is pledge of wealth to come; if a prince be praised for gain sake, the sooner shall I get his [i.e. God’s] gifts, the wealth of one who is never ungenerous’ (McKenna 1939-40, poem 58.1).

In (16), a more literal rendering of *ré lán dan nemhghoire neach*, which Greene renders as ‘the full moon who is furthest beyond all’, would be ‘the full moon to whom any one is **least close**’,

9 For nom. sing. *in(n)se*, see McManus 2008, quatrain 1 and note.

10 Note that the rhyme *nemháobhne : gealáobhne* is not an example of the metrical fault of *caoiche* as different inflectional forms of the adjective *aoibhinn* are rhyming here.

11 My thanks to Damian McManus for suggesting that we should read the second half-quatrain here as a comparative sentence with *ioná* omitted: *faicse dhamh dearloicthe Dé [ioná] cradh an té as neamhdhoichte*. Perhaps we should read *dé* ‘from him’ rather than gen. *Dé* ‘God’ here.

i.e. ‘the full moon from whom all are equally distant’. *Neamhghoire* is the superlative from *neamh-* + *gar* ‘close’.¹²

(16) *Tairngeartach Críche Connla,*
*oidi an aoisi*¹³ *healadhna,*
ré lán dan °nemhghoire °neach,
lámh is erlaimhe eineach. (nemhghoire : erlaimhe)

‘The promised one of Ireland, the fosterfather of poets, the full moon who is furthest beyond all, hand which is readiest in generosity’ (Greene 1972, poem 2.44).

This construction was not an innovation of the EModIr period to judge from the following examples from Late Middle Irish. My earliest prose examples of this construction are from the Late MidIr version of Lucan’s *Pharsalia* (Stokes 1909). In (17), *nemadhu* represents comparative *nem-* + *ada* ‘due, fitting’; I would emend Stokes’ translation ‘more unduly’ to ‘**less fittingly**’.

(17) *Ba mactad mōr leis ind abairt do rigníset na bloga sin na n-inni, ar nī dernsat inni rīam rompo abairt bad nemadhu indās.*

‘Greatly did he marvel at the manner in which those portions of the entrails behaved, for never before had entrails behaved more unduly’ (Stokes 1909, 74-5).

In (18), *nemnēllaighi* is the comparative of *nem-* + *nél(l)ach* ‘cloudy’.

(18) *Is inti sen bad lía lucht na h-ealadan sin, fobīthin ar is glaini 7 is nemnēllaighi in firmaimint dōib inās do lucht in talman arcena.*

‘’Tis in Egypt the men of that science were most numerous, because the firmament is clearer and **less cloudy** to them than to the folk of the rest of the earth’ (Stokes 1909, 76-7).

The following verse example is from the famous poem beginning *Géisid cúan*. *Nemthruáige* is the comparative of *nem-* + *trúag* ‘sad’; this is correctly rendered by Murphy as ‘less sad’.

¹² It appears that *amhghar*, the stable negative of the adjective *gar*, is confined to the sense ‘difficult’ (from the extended sense of *gar*, ‘easy, convenient’). See *DIL* s.v. *amgar*.

¹³ Read *aois-si* and, in the translation, read ‘the fosterfather of poets’ as ‘the fosterfather of us poets’.

(19) *Trúag in fhaíd*
do-ní in smólach i nDruim Chaín;
*ocus ní **nemthrúaige** in scol*
do-ní in lon i Leitir Laíg.

‘Sad is the cry the thrush makes in Drumkeen; and no **less sad** is the note of the blackbird in Leitir Laíg’ (Murphy 1956, poem 49.3).

To my knowledge, the construction discussed here does not survive in contemporary Irish. It is not mentioned in any discussion of how to express lesser degree in Modern Irish known to me. In *Graiméar Gaeilge na mBráithre Críostaí* §11.35 we read

‘Uaireanta úsáidtear breischéim aidiachta le [...] [h]ainmneach tagartha ainmfhocail. Feidhm aidiachta breischéime a bhíonn ag an ngrúpa: *an cainteoir is mó cáil* (= ... is cáiliúla); *an duine ba lú eagla* (= ... ba neamheaglaí); *an fíon ba dheise blas* (= ... is blasta); *an fear ab fhéarr urchar*’

‘Sometimes the comparative adjective is used with [...] the qualificatory nominative of a noun. The group *an cainteoir is mó cáil* (= ... is cáiliúla); *an duine ba lú eagla* (= ... ba neamheaglaí); *an fíon ba dheise blas* (= ... is blasta); *an fear ab fhéarr urchar* has the function of a comparative adjective.’

The *Graiméar* here states that the relative clauses qualifying the headwords *an cainteoir* ‘the speaker’, *an duine* ‘the person’, *an fíon* ‘the wine’ and *an fear* ‘the man’ function like a comparative adjective. The relative clauses which qualify the headwords in the four examples above are in fact possessive relative clauses. (Historically, possessive resumptive pronouns are not required in copular possessive relative clauses.) While the first three examples given in the *Graiméar* can indeed be translated into natural English with comparative/superlative adjective constructions, the last cannot (note that it is not glossed): ‘the more/most famous speaker’ (‘the speaker whose fame is greatest’); ‘the more/most fearless person’ (‘the person whose fear is less/least’); ‘the better-/best-tasting wine’ (‘the wine the taste of which was better/best’); but ‘the

man whose cast was better/best'.¹⁴ It should also be noted that, to my knowledge, sentences of this type cannot contain an object of comparison: **an duine ba lú eagla ná mé* 'the person more famous than me' is not found.¹⁵

It is interesting to note that the possessive relative clause *ba lú eagla* 'whose fear was least' is glossed *ba neamheaglaí* in the *Graiméar*. One might translate this as 'less/least fearful' and propose that it is a survival of the construction that is the subject of this note. However, it is unlikely that *neamheaglach* is a non-stable formation here; it is sufficiently common word to warrant a separate entry in Ó Dónaill 1977. While ModIr does allow adjectives in *neamh-* in the comparative/superlative, to my knowledge, this only occurs with stable negatives in *neamh-*, such as *neamhthrócaireach*, which is better translated as 'merciless' rather than with the highly-marked 'not merciful'.¹⁶ Herein may lie the reason for the failure of the construction described in this note to

14 Such constructions are also found in the earlier language. See, for example, *An té is cruaidhe cuing smachta / nō as lugha dúil daonnachta*, 'He whose self-control is greatest and whose charitable inclination is least' (*ABM* poem 106.6ab).

In addition, in EModIr, a predicative adjective could take a genitival complement in copular sentences. These adjectives can be comparative/superlative: *A ghéag fhíthe as uaisle bpóir* 'splendid scion of most noble lineage' (*DiD* 81.39a). This construction does not survive into the contemporary language.

15 Other strategies to render lesser degree in English-language examples into contemporary Irish include the use of the comparative/superlative form of *beag* (*lú*) and other adjectives as predicates in copular clauses, e.g. *is lú an phráinn atá leis seo* (lit. 'the urgency that is associated with this is less') rendering 'this is less urgent'; *is annaimhe a tharlaíonn sé* (lit. 'it is rarer that it happens') 'it happens less frequently'. It is noteworthy that predicative *mó* and *lugha* can also be used to convey greater and lesser degree adverbially in EModIr. See, for example, *mó as ghrinnte gleic Lúisifir*, 'hotter and sharper grows Lucifer's attack' (*AiD* poem 50.17b) and *faide an Mhumha ó fhóir Uladh / lugha as cóir a cronughadh*, 'Munster was further from the Ulster band, it is less fitting to lament it [more literally, 'less is it fitting to lament it']' (Fraser and O'Keefe 1931, poem 17.22cd). A particularly interesting example of sentences of this type brought to my attention by Damian McManus is found in the following quatrain by Tadhg mac Dáire: *File ag druing dá dtreibh féin / ag coimhead seanchais dá bhfréimh / mar thuigim anois ar Chorc / do réir m'aithne 's mó as neamholc*, 'That each tribe [read 'family'] should have a part of its own stock to defend the lore of its race – as I see now in the case of Corc – is what is best [more literally 'is what is most not faulty' or 'is what is least faulty' here] in my opinion' (McKenna 1918, poem 3.31). The wording here seems rather awkward at first glance, but it should be born in mind that this is the final quatrain of the poem and that *neamholc* forms a *dúnadh* (metrical closure) by echoing the first word of the poem. The poet begins the poem with criticism of remarks by the northern poet Torna about the Munsterman Corc (*Olc do thagrais, a Thorna*) and concludes with a remedy for regional bias among historians (*do réir m'aithne 's mó as neamholc*); the juxtaposition of *olc* and *neamholc* in this way creates a pointed contrast between the supposedly faulty scholarship of a single poet-historian (Torna) and the less faulty scholarship cultivated by a plurality of historians. As Damian McManus points out to me, the use of *is mó* and *is lugha* in sentences of this type is particularly useful given that certain predicates do not have a comparative/superlative form, such as the verbal of necessity and the likes of *mithidh* and *éidir*: *gá tarbha as mó budh maoidhte?* 'what benefit would be more to be boasted of?' (McKernan 1946-7, quatrain 58d).

Mention should also be made here of constructions such as the following with *níos lú* + noun in the genitive in the contemporary language: *tá níos lú costais ag baint leis* (lit. 'there is less of a cost associated with it') rendering 'it's less expensive'. All of the contemporary Irish examples in this footnote are found in *An Foclóir Nua Béarla Gaeilge*, s.v. less (focloir.ie/ga/dictionary/ei/less; accessed 28 November 2016).

16 Similarly, it is doubtful, for example, whether any Irish-speaker would regard contemporary Irish *neafaiseach* 'insubstantial, trivial' as a combination of *neamh-* and *toiseach* (< *tois(e)* 'measure, measurement, size, bulk'); as such comparative/superlative *neafaisí* can only be understood as 'more/most trivial', i.e. as indicating greater degree. In other commonly-occurring adjectives in *neamh-* the first element is transparently a negative prefix, though the second element does not (commonly) occur independently in speech to my knowledge (e.g. *neamhspleách* 'independent', not 'not dependent').

become a productive method of indicating lesser degree in ModIr. The construction in Late Mid and EModIr that I have described requires the formation of non-stable compounds in *neamh-*. When *neamh-* forms stable negative adjectives, this construction is no longer available as a means of indicating lesser degree in the case of those adjectives; in the case of a stable negative in *neamh-* such as *neamhthrócaireach*, it would be impossible to distinguish between ‘more merciless’ and ‘less merciful’ using the construction to which I have drawn attention above.

ABBREVIATIONS

DiD = *Dioghluim Dána*, ed. Láimhbheartach Mac Cionnaith (1938). Dublin.

TD = *The Bardic Poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn (1550-1591)*, ed. E. Knott (1922-6). 2 volumes. London.

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