

Middle Welsh supplement

bot 'to be'

The commonest and most complex verb in the language, unfortunately. A full coverage would require several lectures. This handout provides a basic starting point.

bot has the functions of the copula and the substantive verb.

- The copula conveys what things are or are like: this is a table, this table is solid. In other words, they say that some noun or pronoun is equivalent to another noun or has the attributes of an adjective.
- The substantive verb indicates that something exists: there is a table. Also, it conveys existence in space and time: the table is in the kitchen.

In Irish these two functions are so separate that grammars describe two separate verbs, the copula *is* and the substantive verb *tá* (Old Irish *at-tá*). Even so, there is mixing between them and the functions of the copula have over time drifted to the substantive verb. In Welsh the two are not so easy to distinguish even in the Middle Welsh period, but the difference is still important to remember when learning and reading. *GMW* §145.

Forms

First, here is a fairly comprehensive list of the forms (*GMW* §144):

Present

wyf	yttwyf, ydwyf
wyt	yttwyt, ydwyt
yw, mae, oes, ys, yssyd	
ym	yttym, ydym
ywch	yttywch, ydywch
ynt, maent, yssydynt	yttynt, ydynt
ys (impersonal)	

Imperfect

oedwn	yttöedwn, ydoedwn
oedut	yttöedut, etc.
oed	yttöed, and so on
oedem	
oedewch	
oedynt	
oedit	

Present habitual/future

bydaf
bydy
byd
bydwn
bydwch
bydant

bydir

Preterite

buum
buost
bu
buam, buom
buawch
buant, buont

buwyt

Present subjunctive

bwyf
bych
bo, boet
bom
boch
bont

byther

Imperative

byd
bit
bydwn
bydwch
boent

Past habitual/conditional

bydwn
bydut
bydei
bydem
bydewch
bydynt

bydit

Pluperfect

buasswn
buassut
buassei
buassem
buassewch
buessynt

buessit

Past subjunctive

bewn
beut
bei
beym
bewch
beynt

bythit, bydit

Notes on the tenses

Let's start by noting that **bot** has more tenses than typical verbs.

- The functions of the present are split up, with the strict present meaning going to **wyf**, etc. and the habitual and future going to **bydaf**. Compare Irish *tá mé* and *bím*.

- Likewise the idea of continuous pastness goes to **oedwn** and habit and conditionality – ‘would’ – goes to **bydwn**.
- Confusingly, however, **oedwn** often is used for ‘would’ as well:

da oed gennyf pei ys gwelwn

‘I would be glad [it would be good with me] if I saw it.’ (*GMW* §120 p. 110)

- The imperfect and preterite are different in the same way as for other verbs, but this is confusing for English speakers who only have ‘was/were’. **oedwn** focuses on the past state, **buum** on its finality and completeness.

The copula: basics

Next, how the copula function works. The older word order was copula + predicate + subject, just as in Irish, and so differing from the usual older order with other verbs, VSO. Here are some of Llywarch Hen’s complaints about losing his son and getting old:

oed gwr vy mab ‘my son was a [real] man’.

oed kynwaew vym par ‘my spear was a front-rank spear’

bum hy ‘I used to be bold’

bum eiryau ‘I used to be handsome’

wyf keuynggrwm, wyf trwm, wyf truan

‘I am bent-backed, I am sluggish, I am wretched.’

Note the order: in **oed gwr vy mab**, the subject is **vy mab**, and the predicate is **gwr**. In **bum hy**, etc. the subject is inside the verb so no separate subject is required. But a pronoun may appear:

ot oed uawr ef

‘if he was big’

The 3 sg. present was **ys**:

Ys trist Euyrdyl o’r drallawt heno

‘Efrddyl is sad because of the disaster tonight.’

The predicate could be a noun or an adjective.

Negation and questions worked as for other verbs, i.e. with **ny^H**, **a^L**:

Nyt wyf anhyet ‘I am not nimble’.

Ny bu eidyl hen yn was. ‘No old man was ever feeble as a lad.’

A vyd llawn dy got ti uyth? ‘Will your bag ever be full?’

But note carefully the 3 sg. present forms. **nyt** + 3 sg. present was just **nyt**, and **a** + 3 sg. present gave **ae**:

Nyt reit iti hynny.

‘That is not a necessity for you.’
Ae meu y minneu dy uerch di weithon?
‘Is your daughter mine [all] for myself now?’

The syntax is just the same as in positive sentences. In these examples, the subject comes last (**hynny, dy uerch di**) and the predicate (**reit, meu y minneu**) after the copula.

Older Welsh grammars are not clear on the point that **nyt, ae** actually contain a copula form rather than treating them as some kind of particle, e.g. *GMW*. It is important to recognize that these are combinations of **ny, a** with a 3 sg. copula form, as is made clear e.g. in Schumacher, ‘Mittelkymrisch’, p. 191. Compare Irish **ní fear é, an fear é?** Phonological change has obscured the form of the copula but it is required for the syntax.

Other combinations: **ponyt, panyt** ‘is ... not?’, **o** ‘if’ > **os** ‘if ... is’, **kan** ‘since’ > **kanys** ‘since ... is’, etc.

ac os buw, y dwyn gyt a thi
‘and if he is alive [you can] take him with you.’

Here **o** = ‘if’, **-s** is 3 sg. present ‘he is’, followed by predicate **buw** [= **byw** in usual spelling].

After **pan**, the form **yw** is used:

yr pan yw tawel ryuel
‘since the time that war has been silent’
pan yw brith iyrchwyn
‘why a roe fawn is speckled’ [this is the older meaning of **pan** ‘from where’]

And **mor** ‘so’:

mor yw gwael gwelet ...
‘it is so bad to see ...’ [NB **gwelet** is the grammatical subject]

In Old Irish terms, **ys** was an absolute form, so it was used at the beginning of a clause and after words that were not conjunct particles; **yw** was its conjunct equivalent used after conjunct particles such as **pan** or **mor**.

The present subjunctive made the same distinction: absolute **boet**, conjunct **bo**:

Poet gwyl Duw ‘may God be kind’ [**poet** is a byform of **boet**]
kyt boet mawr y Tat ‘though the Father is great’
pan uo marw yr edlyg ‘when the heir apparent dies [= is dead]’.

pan was a conjunct particle, **kyt** was not. There is no clear list of conjunct particles as this part of Welsh grammar has not been comprehensively worked out.

After **y**, the 3 sg. present is **mae**:

Ac o achaws hynny y mae digassawc yr adar y'r tylluan
'and for that reason the birds are hostile to the owl.'

And there is a special 3 sg. present relative form, **yssyd** (> **yssy, sy, syd**):

nawd yssyd ufyd
'protection that is humble'

Negative relative **nyt**:

ac ar nyd beichawc onadunt ...
'and those of them who are not pregnant' [**ar** is a pronoun here]

The copula in clefts

One of the most important functions of the copula was to focus on items in clefts. This means taking the focused element out of the clause and making it the predicate of the copula. Then the clause followed as a relative clause.

Oed Maelgun a welun yn imwan
'It was Maelgwn whom I saw fighting'.
Bu yr drwc y'r paganyeit yd adnabuant hwy dy lewder di eiryoet.
'It was for ill to the pagans that they ever became acquainted with your valour.'
Ny bu hir y buant yny doethont y Arberth.
'It was not long that they were until they came to Arberth.'
Ae ti a eirch uy merch?
'Is it you who's asking for my daughter?'
Ys mi a'e heirch.
'It's me who's asking for her.'

The relative clause with **a** functions as a subject of the copula, so the order remains copula + predicate + subject.

Note in the last two examples how a pronoun subject can be extracted, and how the verb remains in the 3 sg., which is the default in relative clauses. Compare the (natural spoken) English equivalent.

The copula itself is always 3 sg. because the subject is the relative clause. In the last two examples, **ti** and **mi** are predicates not subjects.

When the relative clause was adverbial, there was originally no relative marking to follow:

Bydei re ruthrwn y waew
'It used to be swiftly that I would rush towards a spear.'

But the particle **y** (originally a marker of noun clauses) came to be inserted. The development almost exactly parallels Irish. In Old Irish clefts with an adverbial, there was similarly no marking of the relative, but later such clauses came to be marked relative like ordinary relative clauses. Welsh, however, distinguishes two different kinds of marking, **a** and **y**.

Over time the positive copula came to be put by default in the present, no matter what the tense of the relative clause, and then to be deleted altogether.

Ys aflwydyannus y daruu y myui.

'It is [was] unsuccessfully that it turned out for me.'

Mi a'e heirch

'It's me who's asking for her.'

But the non-positive parts like **nyt**, **ae** could not be deleted and remain:

Nyt y kwnn ... a ladawd y baed

'It was not the hounds that killed the boar.'

The deletion of **ys** from most Middle Welsh clefts is part of the reason why the copula in **nyt**, **ae** etc. was not clearly perceived by earlier grammarians.

Eventually, as you will know by now, these clefts ended up giving rise to the V2 order in which **a** and **y** no longer function as relative particles. But to express strong focus, clefts without **ys** were still used throughout Middle Welsh, leading to potential ambiguity. Take:

Gwas ystauell a geif yr anneiroed a'r enderiged.

Does this mean 'it is the servant of the chamber who gets the heifers and the bullocks', with strong focus, or merely 'the servant of the chamber gets the heifers and the bullocks', without strong focus? Context is the only guide, but a formal difference is visible here:

Mi a'e heirch. 'It's me who's asking for her.'

Mi a'e harchaf. 'I am asking for her.'

In the first one, the cleft, **mi** is the predicate of the understood copula, but in the V2 construction it has clearly come to be felt as the subject since it triggers verbal agreement.

Grammars call **Mi a'e heirch** the 'mixed order' as if it were a mix of the abnormal and VSO orders. This is an even worse term, if that is possible, than 'abnormal order' and should be abandoned. *GMW* §146 explains the construction reasonably well but keeps the regrettable name.

Negative and interrogative clefts are clearly distinguishable from V2 since they have to begin with **nyt, ae, ponyt** etc. followed by something that is not a verb.

nyt y dyn a doeth [cleft]

'It was not the man who came'

ny doeth y dyn or (rarer) **y dyn ny doeth** [V2 main clause]

'the man did not come'.

Clefts are embedded using either **y mae** or **pan yw** or **y taw**. (**pan** simply means 'that' here). Again, originally **mae, yw** varied for tense but later became fixed as present forms:

A wledic, ny wydyem pan oed ti a grogem!

'O lord, we did not know that it was you whom we were crucifying!'

A gwybot a wnaeth Arthur pan yw hynny a uedylyei Owain.

'And Arthur knew that that was what Owain was thinking.'

A'm kyffes a dygaf ytti, Gei, may rywed na thodeis yn llyn tawd rac kywilyd.

'And I give you my confession, Cai, that is is a marvel that I did not melt into a puddle for shame.'

y mae, y taw became Modern Welsh **mai, taw** [note loss of **y** already in last example]. **pan yw** vanished altogether.

With **o**, etc.:

os arch gyuartal a erchy ymi.

'if it's a fair request that you ask of me'.

Generally clefts did not weaken into V2 structures in such places, but rather the old VSO survived, but there are cases like this:

kanys Crist a'm croesses i

which must mean 'since Christ has blessed me' rather than 'since it is Christ who blessed me.' The previous example might similarly be translated 'if you ask a fair request of me.'

The V2 copula

The copula developed its own answer to the V2 construction that was usual with other verbs. The predicate is placed in the first position, then the copula, then the subject. There is no particle. The 3 sg. present is **yw**, imperfect **oed**, and the **b-** forms are always lenited.

Rud ynt wy.

'They are red'.

Drwc yw iti hagen llygru dy uab.

'It is bad for you however to injure your son.'

Mwyuwy uyd yn gwrdaaeth.

'The greater will be our good name.'

A hynny vydd gwerth cath.

'And that is the value of a cat.' [but in the Welsh **hynny** is the predicate]

This construction displaces copula + predicate + subject during Middle Welsh outside of clefts.

When this construction gets embedded, copula forms appear before it:

os cath a warchattwo yscubawr y brenhin vyd

'if it is a cat that guards the king's barn.'

A thi a wybydy y mae gwac uocsach yw y teu di

'And you will know that yours is a vain boast'.

And compare the occasional example of things like

ys dewr a was wyt ti.

'you are a brave lad.'

The development of this V2 construction is not wholly clear, but it behaves like the V2 structures of other verbs. It's unclear to me whether **vyd**, **yw** etc. were originally relative as in the **a** construction found with other verbs.

More rarely the subject of the copula can be put first. If this happens, then the construction is just the same as for other verbs, subject + **a** + verb:

ef a vydei varw

'he would be dead'

Mi a vydaf porthawr y Arthur.

'I am [always] doorkeeper to Arthur.'

Quite often **a** goes missing before **oed**, while the present has to be the special relative form **yssyd**:

a'r paladyr oed brenn lawrus

'and the shaft was laurel wood'.

Y mor hwnnw yssyd enryued a pheriglus

'That sea is strange and dangerous.'

The substantive verb

Most of the above applies also to **bot** as a substantive verb, so I will focus on the differences here.

1. The substantive verb often stands at the head of its clause, and the present and imperfect forms require **y**, **yd** even though no adverbial precedes. The 3 sg. present is **mae**, pl. **maent**.

Ac y mae llyn arall.

'And there is another lake.'

Ac y maent yn kyrchu y tir.

'And they are heading for the land.'

2. After particles the 3 sg. present is **oes** with indefinite subjects:

A oes porthawr?

'Is there a doorkeeper?'

Nyd oes, yssywaeth, o'r seith /namyn tri

'Alas, of the seven there are only three...'

It is **ydiw, yttiw** with definite subjects. See no. 4 below.

3. V2 order can be used, with either the subject or an adverb placed first. The usual particles are required:

Yno y dynyon a oedynt yn ymborth ar y frwyth

'There they people were feeding off the fruit.'

Yno y mae molwet diruawr eu meint.

'There there are snails of huge size.'

Note **yssyd** when the subject precedes a 3 sg. present (or pl., there being no separate pl. form):

Llys yssyd y'r brenhin hwnnw.

'That king has a court' [there is a court to that king]

Y gwaged teckaf o'r holl vyt yssyd yno.

'The fairest women in the whole world are there.'

4. There is a special set of present and imperfect forms beginning with **yd-** or **ytt-**. These are only found in the substantive verb (at least until late Middle Welsh) and their usage has been clarified by Schumacher, 'Mittelkymrisch', pp. 210–11 (basically, they occur after various particles). I won't go into details here.

pan yttoedwn yn kerdet

'when I was walking'

Substantive verb + yn for copula

yn, probably originally the preposition meaning 'in', came to stand between **bot** and its predicate. It became differentiated from the preposition by taking lenition, not aspiration. Its first duty was to be used after the verbal noun of the copula, because something was needed to attach a predicate to what was indeed a noun:

a gwedy eu bot yn barawt

'and after they were ready'

For the use of **yn** to mark predicates, compare the analogous Irish *tá sí ina múinteoir* 'she is a teacher' [in her teacher], but the Welsh construction has no possessive.

From there **yn** spread to finite forms. Note that, since **yn** was originally an expression of place and thus adverbial, that it is the substantive verb with which it occurs.

ac y mae y enw yn parawt [NB unmarked lenition]
'and his name is ready'

Tra ytoed ynteu yn glaf
'while he was ill'.

Note the **yt-** form in the second example, clearly the substantive verb.

However, it is obvious that this construction would lead to a washing away of the distinction. Compare:

Pwyll, Pendeuic Dyuet, a oed yn arglwyd ar seith cantref Dyvet.
'Pwyll, prince of Dyfed, was lord over the seven cantrefs of Dyfed.'

Bendigeiduran uab Llyr a oed urenhin coronawc ar yr ynys hon
'Bendigeidfran fab Llyr was the crowned king over this island.'

where **yn** may be present or not.

Over time, this construction usurped the copula almost entirely for adjective predicates. So nowadays we say **mae hi'n dda** 'she's good' not **da yw hi**, which is now an extremely highly marked option. With nouns, **merch dda yw hi** or **mae hi'n ferch dda** are both available, but the latter is gaining ground.

Substantive verb + *yn* + verbal noun

Continuous tenses are formed with **yn** + verbal noun. This **yn** is differentiated from predicate **yn** by triggering no mutation at all.

Ac y maent yn ssymudaw enweu.
'and they are changing names.'

a phan yttoedynt yn mynet
'and when they were going'

ac yno y bu yn gorffowys dridieu
'and there he rested for three days' [note *bu* emphasizes completion, *oed* would emphasize the process].

A phan doethant yno, yd oedit yn dygyuori y wlat.
'And when they arrived there, the land was being mustered for war.'

The verbal noun can be put first; usually **yn** is then deleted.

Mynet yd oedwn

'I was going'.

This is the equivalent for continuous tenses of the verbal noun + **a** + **gwneuthur** construction that is used for punctual tenses, and correspondingly, more of the predicate can be attracted into the first slot.

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