Chapter Four  Forms of the Verb To Be in Irish

4.0 Introduction

This chapter begins my three chapter discussion of the behavior of non-verbal predication in Irish. In this chapter, I discuss the distribution and syntactic behavior of two different copular constructions in Irish: the Tá (Bí) and Is constructions. In chapter 5, I look in detail at a word order alternation within the Is class of constructions. The final section on Irish copular constructions will be chapter 6, where I show how the analysis developed in this section and in chapter 5 runs into problems with complex non-verbal predicates, and will present a solution based on Chomsky's (1994, 1995b) Bare Theory of Phrase structure.

Like Spanish and many other languages, Irish has at least two constructions which roughly mean be in English. These are Tá (or Bí) and Is. Tá is known in the prescriptive grammars as ‘substantive be’; Is on the other hand is known as ‘copular be’. I will avoid this nomenclature where possible, since strictly speaking, both are copular in nature. I use

\[\text{For the reader’s information, these morphemes are pronounced [ta:], [bi:] and [is] (not [iz]). Irish often seems to the reader to be a language designed to frustrate English speakers because of its complex spelling and highly suppletive morphology. The forms of the verb Tá are no exception. In the appendix to this thesis, there is a complete set of paradigms for Is and Tá.}\]
the Irish words *Tá* and *is* instead. There are two different versions of the *Is* construction. One which is used in a predicative sense and is used with indefinite nominal predicates, and the other is equative used with definite nominal predicates. Examples of these constructions are seen below in (1b&c). Notional predicates are shown in italics; notional subjects are shown in **boldface**. Example (1a) is an example of the verbal *Tá* construction where the *Tá* auxiliary stands in initial (verbal) position, followed by the subject (in this case 'Jean Luc Picard') marked with nominative case, and then the non-verbal predicate (*mór* 'big'). Nominal predicates are almost never allowed in this construction (see discussion below for more details). Example (1b) shows the predicative use of the *Is* construction. In this form, the *Is* morpheme is immediately followed by the indefinite nominal predicate, which is in turn followed an optional agreement morpheme and the subject\(^2\) (*an dalta* "the ensign"). The equative *Is* construction has the subject (marked obligatorily with the preceding agreement morpheme), *Jean Luc Picard*, preceding the definite NP predicate (*an captaen*, "the captain").

1) a) *Tá*  **Jean Luc Picard** *mór*  
   "Jean Luc Picard is big"

   \[Tá\]

   b) *Is*  *Clingéán (é)*  **an dalta**
   "The ensign is a Klingon"

   \[Is\ (predicative)\]

   c) *Is*  é  **Jean Luc Picard** *an captaen*  
   "Jean Luc Picard is the captain"

   \[Is\ (equative)\]

For the moment, we will not deal with the equative construction (1c) and return to it in Chapter 5. In this chapter, I make two distinct points. First, I will show that the *Is* morpheme in (1b&c) does not behave like a real verb, and is really behaving like the preverbal complementizer particles found elsewhere in Irish grammar. Second, contra Doherty (1992, forthcoming) (who claims the distinction between *Is* and *Tá* is one based

\(^2\)This subject takes accusative case. The case marking properties of this construction are discussed in chapter 5.
on the semantic stage/individual level contrast) I claim that the class of constructions involving *Is* have the non-verbal predicates taking inflectional features directly and that these predicates raise through the inflectional complex to clause initial position in a manner completely comparable to tensed verbal predicates (2):

2)

```
TP                                 TP
     T                                        T
      ...                                        ...
     VP                                    NP
      V                                        N
```

The class of *Tá* predicates, on the other hand are those that cannot directly bear inflectional features, thus need the support of the verbal auxiliary *Tá*, like non-verbal predicates in English need support from *be* for inflectional support.

In section 4.1, I examine evidence from syntax, morphology, phonology, language acquisition, and historical change that the *Is* morpheme, despite its traditional prescriptive analysis as a "defective" verb, is in fact a complementizer particle. In section 4.2, I argue for the analysis described above, where non-verbal predicates found in the *Is* constructions are marked with inflectional features and raise overtly in the syntax through the inflectional complex. The predicates found with *Tá*, on the other hand, are unable to bear such features and thus require the presence of the verbal auxiliary *Tá* to support their inflectional features. In section 4.3, I provide a brief explanation of the apparent correlation between the *Is/Tá* alternation and the stage/individual level distinction in terms of light verbs licensing event arguments.
4.1 *Is* is not a verb³

In this section, I explore the categorial status of the morpheme *Is*. I claim, following Doherty (1992, forthcoming), Hendrick (1995) and Alqvist (1972), that *Is* is not a verb, but is rather a pre-predicate complementizer particle. In traditional grammars, *Is* is often referred to as a "defective" verb (see Ó Maille 1912). From a purely descriptive perspective, as well as a historical one, there is some justification for this assumption. First, like verbs in declarative clauses, *Is* is initial in its clause. From a historical perspective, the analysis of *Is* as a verb is also understandable. In Old Irish, the *Is* morpheme was fully inflected like a verb, and shows many similarities to English "is". This is seen in (3).

3) Am 1s ammi 1p/  
   at/it 2s adib/adi 2pl  
   is 3s it 3pl (Old Irish)

These historical and distributional arguments aside, however, there is overwhelming evidence that Modern Irish *Is* is not a verb, but is a complementizer particle.

4.1.1 *Is* as a particle

The strongest evidence for the claim that *Is* is not a verb is syntactic. There is an obvious difference in word order between the predicative *Is* construction and normal sentences with tensed verbs. Irish has a set of pre-verbal complementizer particles, these particles appear first in the sentence always immediately preceding the verb. They show negation, questionhood, embeddedness, and a realis/irrealis mood distinction (Ó Sé 1990).

4) Níor thóg Seán an teach  
   Neg.past build J the house  
   “John did not build the house”

³This section draws heavily on the work of Doherty (1992, forthcoming) and I owe him a large intellectual debt.
It is my contention (following Doherty 1992, forthcoming, and Ahlqvist 1972) that *Is* and its allomorphs⁴ are simply the forms of the these preverbal particles that appear on non-verbal predicates. This is confirmed by the fact that if we assume that *Is* is a particle, nominal predicates appear structurally in the same position as tensed verbs:

5)  a)  *Is* + Predicate + subject
    b)  **Particle** + **Predicate** + subject
        \[ \text{níor } \text{rith} \] \text{ sé}  
        neg.past run he
        "he did not run"
    c.  **Particle** + **Predicate** + subject
        \[ \text{níor } \text{dochtúir} \] \text{ é}  
        Neg.past doctor him
        "He was not a doctor"

The word order for both types is that found in (5a): the particle is immediately followed by the predicate, which in turn is followed by the subject. This suggests that *Is* is functioning like a preverbal particle on sentence initial nominal predicates rather than like a verb. There is a plethora of supporting evidence for this claim.

    First, we have some weak morphological evidence that these morphemes are at least loosely related to the preverbal particles. In many, but not all, cases the particles are identical to, or very similar to, the forms of the *Is* morpheme. This is seen in the following table:

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⁴For a complete paradigm see the appendix at the end of this thesis.
Andrew Carnie

6)  

**Unembedded (without Comp)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Irrealis (past)</th>
<th>Realis (non-past)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Is</strong></td>
<td>bal</td>
<td>ar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Particle</strong></td>
<td>—</td>
<td>ar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Embedded (with Comp)**

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Is</strong></td>
<td>gur</td>
<td>ar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Particle</strong></td>
<td>gur</td>
<td>ar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* An old past-tense particle “do” is sometimes still seen in the written language
  1= form that lenites,  N= form that nasalizes the following word

This of course, is not in any way conclusive, but it is suggestive. However, the fact
(Doherty (1992, forthcoming) that Is cannot cooccur with these particles is stronger
evidence:

7)  

*Ní is amadán é*

*Neg, pres C fool him*

“He is not a fool”

Instead of taking a particle, the copula shows the mood, questionhood and
negation in a

**port manteau** form:

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5For a discussion of the mutation properties of Is see Duffield (1991) and Elordieta (1994)
6This is, in fact, a gross simplification of the data, there are certain co-occurrences of the Is morpheme
with complementizers, many in the past tense. For example the past conditional is:

i) Má ba
   if “is”.past

Simiarly, the past negative question the form Nárbh is decomposable into (ii)

ii) N-á-r-bh
    Neg-Q-Past-“Is”

where the <bh> ending on the particle is a clear lenited reflex of the ba allomorph of the is morpheme. In
the Cois Fhairrge Dialect (Co. Galway) (Ó Siadhail 1989: 221), we find co-occurrence of preverbal particles
with many forms of the copula as in (iii):

iii) go mba
     An mba
     that is.past  Q  is.past

Although these may appear at first glance to be blatant contradictions to the claim made in the main text,
two things should be noted about these forms. First, they are somewhat marked and are limited to specific
dialects. Second, even though these forms are sometimes written as multiple words, it is not inconceivable
that they are dominated by a single syntactic head. This is especially likely given that these elements
together form a single phonological unit which cliticizes to a following word. Recall, there is no reason
that a single head in the system of grammar described here could not be morphologically complex, either
through base generation, or through head movement and incorporation. An example of how the multiple
word analysis of these elements may be simply an orthographic quirk of the Irish writing system is found
in the word Narbh (ii), which is as clearly multi-morphemic as go mba (iii). The fact that go mba is written
as two words is probably simply an arbitrary convention rather than a consequence of the syntactic
configuration.
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8) Ní amadán é
   C.neg.pres fool him
   “He is not a fool”

This is behavior that would be expected of a particle, but not of a verb.

4.1.2 Morphological evidence

Further evidence that *Is* is not a verb comes from the inflectional morphology of Irish verbs. Doherty (1992, forthcoming) notes that in Irish, verbs are inflected for a full range of tenses and moods, past, present, future, conditional and subjunctive. The copula is not; it only has a present/past distinction

9) Present/Future Past/conditional
   *Is* ba

This is a feature that *Is* shares with the preverbal particles. Preverbal particles also only show a past/non-past distinction.

Similar facts are found with respect to agreement phenomena in Irish. In all dialects of the language, certain person/number combinations in certain tenses allow an optional pro-drop agreement pattern (cf. McCloskey and Hale (1984) for more discussion). Take, for example, the pattern seen with the verb *Tá*. Two options are available: either the inflected verb may surface with no overt pronoun (10a), or a verb with no overt agreement may surface with an overt pronoun (10b):

10) a) Táim pro "I am"
    b) Tá mé "I am"

These patterns are productive throughout the verbal system of Irish. They are never found, however, with *Is*.

11) *Isim "I am"

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7*Tá* is, in fact, an exception in allowing both forms to surface. With other verbs if an agreeing form exists in the paradigm, then it entirely blocks the appearance of the form with a pronoun.
4.1.3 Phonological evidence

There is also considerable phonological evidence that *Is* and its allomorphs are particles rather than verbs. Firstly, unlike verbs (12c&d), it may delete freely in fast speech as shown in (12a&b)

12) a) *Is dochtúir é
   *Doctor him
   “He is a doctor”

b) dochtúir é
   *doctor  him
   “He is a doctor”

c) Tá sé mór
   *be he big
   “He is big”

d) * sé mór
   *he big
   “he is big”

The *Is* morphemes also behave like preverbal particles, in that they form a proclitic to the word that follows them. For example, the underlying /s/ of the *Is* morpheme will palatalize to /ʃ/ before a high front vowel. Normally, such palatalization is restricted to clitic groups.

13) *Is é Seán an dochtúir  /is eː.../ \[
   \text{C agr John the doctor}
   “John is the doctor”

Similar evidence comes from ellipsis phenomena (Doherty 1992, forthcoming). Like other proclitics, the *Is* morpheme requires some phonological support to its right. Modern Irish, as will be discussed more extensively below in chapter 6, has no words for yes or no. Instead, the appropriate response to a yes/no question is the appropriately negated or affirmative form of the verb, with the rest of the sentence elided (McCloskey 1991, Doherty 1992):

14) An bhfuil tú tinn? Tá.
   Q be.pres you sick. Am (yes)
   “Are you sick? Yes”
This is not true of *Is. *Is cannot stand on its own. At the very least it requires the meaningless pronoun *ea*, if not the predicate itself, for phonological support.

15) a) An dochtúir tú? *Is ea/*Is

> “Are you a doctor?” “yes”

b. An leatsa an Chevy? Ní liomsa/*Ní

> “Is that your Chevy?” “No”  

(Lit: Is with-you the Chevy? Not with-me)

Evidence from adverb placement also supports the theory that *Is is a proclitic particle. *Cinnte “certainly” can be placed after a lexical verb and before the subject when that subject is a full NP:  

16) Bhí, cinnte, Seán tinn

> “Certainly, John was sick”

This is not true when the subject is an enclitic pronoun (Chung and McCloskey 1987: 226-228):

17) *Bhí, cinnte, sé tinn (cf *Cinnte, bhí sé tinn)

> “Certainly, he was sick”

*Cinnte insertion, then is impossible between a clitic and its host. *Cinnte cannot appear between *Is and the predicate (18).

18). *Is, cinnte, dochtúir é

> “Certainly, he is a doctor.

This clearly suggests that *Is is a clitic, thus providing support to the hypothesis that *Is is a particle rather than a verb.

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8This, obviously, is an exception to the strict VSO order of Irish discussed above in chapter 2. *Cinnte is one of only a few adverbs that can be found non-initially. Only appositive adverbs may appear in this position.

9This is assuming that functional elements show up as particles which often take the form of morphophonological clitics, whereas lexical items (pronouns excluded) rarely show up as morphophonological clitics. See Cardinaletti and Starke (1994) and Barbosa (forthcoming) for discussions of the nature of clitics.
4.1.4 Language shift evidence

There is also evidence from historical merger to suggest that Is is truly a preverbal particle. Ó Sé (1987) notes that in West Kerry Irish, there is a definite trend toward the phonological merger of the preverbal particles and Is. For example, older generations distinguished the question form of Is from the question particle, by the fact that the particle triggered the eclipsis mutation on following words (indicated here by a superscript N), the copula did not. In the speech of most modern speakers these two have merged and both particle and copula trigger eclipsis and have an identical phonological shape:

\[
\text{an} > \text{an}^N \\
\text{Q.is} > \text{Q.part} \]

4.1.5 Language Acquisition Evidence

Finally, we have some evidence from language acquisition that Is is a complementizer particle. Children overgeneralize the use of the is morpheme from contexts with non-verbal predicates to contexts involving verbal predicates. Take for example the forms seen in (20). In adult speech the declarative preverbal particle on a verb like "see" is a null form; the form found with non-verbal predicates is Is. With both negative verbs and non-verbal predicates the form used is Ní. In the speech of a 6 year old Ó Murchú (1993) found an example of the Is morpheme used in a declarative sense with a verb, resulting in the form Is fhaca, impossible in adult speech.

\[\text{Is fhaca} \]

\[\text{Is faca not *Is fhaca.}\]

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10Ó Murchú is not specific as to whether this child is a native speaker or an second language learner, although given the age of the child and the location of much of Ó Murchú’s work (Dublin), it is likely to be a child from an English-medium home, who has attended a naonra (Irish language play group) and is now attending bunscoil (Irish-medium elementary education). In any case, this overgeneralization is startling confirmation of the fact that Is is a particle and not a verb.

11This form is doubly unacceptable for adults. First, it uses the Is morpheme with a verb. Second, the wrong initial consonant mutation has been triggered on the verb. Were Is licit with verbal morphemes, we would predict *Is faca not *Is fhaca.
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20)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal Predicates</th>
<th>Nominal Predicates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive: Ø</td>
<td>Positive: Is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative: Ní</td>
<td>Negative: Ní</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chonaic mé</td>
<td>Is cailín mé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saw I</td>
<td>C girl I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ní fhaca mé</td>
<td>Ní cailín mé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neg saw I</td>
<td>Neg girl I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Child Speech

| Is fhaca mé       | Ní fhaca mé       |
| C Saw I           | Neg saw I         |
| Is cailín mé      | Ní cailín mé      |
| C girl I          | Neg girl I        |

4.1.6 Summary

From the morphological, syntactic, historical, phonological and acquisition evidence, then, I conclude that *Is* is really a pre-predicate complementizer particle rather than a verb. Now that this is clear, in the next section, I will discuss what determines whether a non-verbal predicate appears with verbal *Tá* or in the *Is* constructions.

4.2 Where *Is* and *Tá* are found.

In this section, I provide an account of the difference in usage between *Tá* and *Is*. In section 4.2.1, I describe the distribution of the two constructions. In section 4.2.2, I discuss Doherty's (1992, forthcoming) account of *Tá* and *Is* in terms of Carlson's (1977) stage/individual level distinction. I will reject this proposal on the basis of distributional evidence and instead will propose an analysis in terms of what lexical items and classes of lexical items in a given language may bear inflectional features. I will claim that the predicates found with *Is* are simply those that are allowed to bear inflectional features in Irish.
4.2.1 The distribution

Let us start by examining where each construction appears. *Tá* appears with all types of predicates except nouns. Examples of *Tá* with various types of predicates are seen below in (21):

21) a. Tá sé mó́r
   *Be.pres he big*
   “he is big”

b. Tá Seán go maith
   *be.pres John adv well*
   “John is well”

c. Tá Seán i mBaile Átha Cliath
   *be.pres J in Dublin*
   “John is in Dublin”

d. Tá Seán ag rith
   *be.pres J prog run.*
   “John is running”

e. Bhí an obair déanta
   *be.past the work done*
   “The work was done”

f. *Tá sé dochtúir
   *be.pres he doctor*
   “He is a doctor”

*Is*, on the other hand, is found most productively with nominal predicates:

22) *Is dochtúir mé*
   *(NPs — Productive)*
   “I am a doctor”

It is not generally found with adjectives (23) or prepositions (24) and is never found with verbal participles (25):  

23) *Is cliste iad
   (*adj)*
   “they are clever”

---

12 See below for an exception to this generalization.
13 Except in some Northern Dialects (eg Gaith Dobhair) (Ó Siadhail 1983)
14 The *Is* morpheme is found with adjectives and prepositions in reverse pseudocleft focus constructions. For reasons of space, I will not be discussing them here, but let it suffice to note that such focus items clearly have a different semantic role than the predicates here described.
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24) *Is i nDaoire Seán (*PP)
   C in Derry John
   "*John is in Derry"

25) *Is ag rith é (*Verb)
   C prog run him
   "he is running"

Doherty (1992, forthcoming) notes that there is a set of exceptions to the generalization that no adjectives or prepositional phrases may appear as predicates with *Is*.

The following lexically specified set of adjectives\(^\text{15}\) is found with *Is*:

\[
\begin{array}{llll}
fiú & \text{worthwhile} & fíor & \text{true} \\
maith & \text{good} & olc & \text{evil} \\
aisteach & \text{odd} & iontach & \text{wonderful} \\
ceart & \text{right} & cóir & \text{just} \\
leor & \text{sufficient} & mór & \text{big} \\
beag & \text{small} & fuar & \text{cold} \\
gruama & \text{gloomy} & cosúil & \text{similar} \\
ionann & \text{equivalent} & greannmhar & \text{funny} \\
mall & \text{slow} & & \\
\end{array}
\]

(from Doherty (1992))

This is seen in the following example taken from Doherty (1992).

27) Más ceart mo chuimhne (from Doherty 1992)
   if+C right my memory
   "If my memory is right" (Más = Má + Is)

Similarly, there is a set of exceptional PP predicates which may appear with *Is*. These are seen in (28).

28) de “of” (meaning origin)
    as “out of” (meaning origin)
    ó “from” (meaning origin)
    le “with” (indicating possession)

Examples of these are seen below:

29) a. Is de bhunadh Phrotastúnach í
    C of stock Protestant her
    “She is of Protestant stock” (from Doherty 1992)

\(^{15}\)Ó Siadhail (1983) notes that many of these exceptions are falling out of use in favour of Tá. In Old Irish all adjectives were found with the *Is*, and never with Tá (OIr. attāu). During the Middle Irish period, usage shifted and only nominal predicates were found with *Is*. See Ó Máille (1912), Thurneysen (1980), Dillon (1927/28).
We can conclude then that Tá is allowed with all predicates except nominal ones, and that Is is found with all types of predicates except verbal ones, but is only productively found with nominal predicates. This is summarized in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tá</th>
<th>Is</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NP</td>
<td>productive</td>
<td>productive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADJ</td>
<td>productive</td>
<td>closed class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>productive</td>
<td>closed class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VP</td>
<td>productive</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.2 Doherty (1992, forthcoming)

Looking at the distribution described above in section 4.2.2, Doherty (1992, forthcoming) notes\(^{16}\) that all the predicates found with Is correspond to the class identified by Carlson (1977) as Individual level predicates, under at least one reading. Carlson claims that all predicates have readings of one of two types\(^{17}\). The first is the Individual level, which are permanent and stable properties of an individual. The other is Stage level, where the predicate identifies a temporary property of the individual or object in question. Kratzer (1988) extends this proposal by claiming that stage level predicates have a Davidsonian event argument (Davidson 1967) (here represented as L) which marks the predication in temporal and spatial location. Individual level predicates lack this property. Doherty (1992, forthcoming) claims that the distribution of Is and Tá is elegantly accounted for with this approach. Individual level predicates appear with Is, stage level ones appear

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\(^{16}\)Capturing the distinction first formally noted in Benvenste (1966) and more intuitively by traditional Irish grammarians. See also Stenson (1981).

\(^{17}\)In fact, Carlson discusses a third type: that of *kind*. Only *individual* and *stage* are relevant here, however.
with *Tá*\(^{18}\). There is some empirical evidence in favour of such an approach. Consider the following English sentence:

31) John was a doctor.

Simplifying somewhat, this sentence is ambiguous between two readings. Under one reading (the individual level), being a doctor was a permanent property of John. The past tense here suggests that John is no longer alive. The other reading (the stage level), John’s doctoring was a temporary thing. John is no longer a doctor, but he is still alive—perhaps he lost his license to practice. These two readings are represented in Kratzer’s terms in (32):

32) a) PAST [doctor’(John)] Individual level  
    b) (∃L)[PAST(L) & doctor’(John,L)] Stage level  

Now let’s consider the equivalent Irish sentence using the morpheme *Is*:\(^{19}\)

33) Ba dhochtúir é  
    "he was a doctor"

Interestingly, this sentence can only have the reading in (32a), the individual level reading (i.e. permanent). The reading in (32b) is excluded. To get the reading in (32b), a different construction with verbal *Tá* and the morpheme *i ‘in’*\(^{20}\) must be used. This is seen in (34) where the phrase “but isn’t licensed now” is used to force a stage level reading.

34) Bhí Seán ina dhochtúir (ach níl díolúine aige anois)  
    "John was a doctor (but he doesn’t have a license now)
    can only have the reading of (32b)"

The corresponding sentence with *Is* is ungrammatical:

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\(^{18}\)A similar distinction is frequently claimed to exist with Spanish *ser* and *estar* in the literature. See Schmitt (1992) for discussion. See also Rouveret (forthcoming) for a discussion of similar Welsh alternations.

\(^{19}\)The suppletive forms of the various Irish morphemes may be confusing to the reader here. The present and past tense forms of these are seen in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Tá</th>
<th>Is</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>Bhí</td>
<td><em>Ba</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See the appendix at the back of this thesis for fuller paradigms.

\(^{20}\)David Cram (1983) has analyzed the corresponding Scots Gaelic morpheme *ann* as the stative aspect particle, such an analysis could be used here.
35) *Ba dhochtúir é (ach níl díolúine aige anois)
   “He was a doctor but now he doesn’t have a license”

Given this, then, there seems to be strong evidence in favor of Doherty’s proposals that the
Is/Tá distinction is one of individual versus stage level. Unfortunately, this proposal does
not stand up under closer scrutiny.

There are a large number of individual level predicates that not only show up with
Tá, but cannot show up with Is. Consider, for example, the following two sentences.

36) a) Bhí sé cliste
   “He was clever”

   b) Bíonn madráí ag amhastrach
   “Dogs bark”

(36a) is ambiguous between a stage-level and an individual level predicate, but the
individual level reading is allowed with Tá (showing up here as Bhí). In fact, the
corresponding sentence with Is is ungrammatical:

37) *Ba chliste é
   “He was clever (before he died)”

The sentence in (36b) on the other hand can only have an individual level reading, but still
shows up with the verb Tá. (surfaces as Bíonn)

It thus follows then that, while it is true that all predicates found with Is are
individual level predicates, it is not true that all individual level predicates are predicates
found with Is.\(^2\) Since we are asking what the difference between an Is predicate and a Tá
one is, we cannot reduce the solution to individual/stage level (contra Doherty 1992, forthcming)\(^2\). There is no way to predict (with the exception of nouns) whether a

\(^2\)See Schmitt (1992) for a similar argument about Spanish ser and estar. She claims that the distinction
is not one of stage/individual level but rather is in terms of what elements can show aspect.

\(^2\)It is perhaps unfair to criticize Doherty (1992) in this regard since he never claims that individual level
predicates are only found with Is. Rather, he only says that Is allows only individual level predicates as
complements. However, the logical extension of this claim is the one examined and criticized above. The
Chapter 4: Forms of the verb "to be" in Irish

predicate is found with *Is* or not based upon its reading as an individual or stage level predicate. The difference then must follow from another source. I claim that this difference is a lexical one, and follows from which inflectional features are found on the predicate head.

4.2.3 *Carnie (1993)*

In this section, I present an analysis of the difference between *Is* and *Tá*, based not on interpretive semantic criteria, but rather on a lexical and syntactic difference. This is the analysis which I presented in Carnie (1993) and the one that I will adopt here.

Let us first consider the basic structure of a sentence with an indefinite nominal predicate (marked with *Is*) in Irish. The word order is as follows:

38) *Is* + Predicate Nominal + subject

As mentioned above, this word order is reminiscent of the word order of simple tensed clauses:

39) Particle + Verbal Predicate + subject (+object)

Given that the word order in (39) is derived by head movement of the predicate to the highest inflectional position, let us assume that the word order in (38) is similarly derived following a suggestion in Collberg (1990). A predicate raises to a functional category to check its features before SPELL OUT. This is consistent with the evidence that suggests *Is* is a tense particle (for a closely-related proposal for the Breton predicates, see Hendrick (1994, forthcoming); see also Stowell (1991) for related discussion). This type of derivation is abstractly sketched in (40)

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*revision of Doherty (1992):* Doherty (forthcoming) argues that the fact that only individual level predicates are allowed in *Is* sentences follows from the claim that subjects in *Is* clauses appear in the specifier of IP. There are many problems with this claim (see chapter 8 of this thesis for more discussion), not the least of which is that I have argued in chapter 3 that all Irish subjects appear in the specifier of some inflectional phrase.

*23For the moment, I will ignore the issue of nominal predicates that are phrasal or otherwise complex . I will return to these in chapter 5.*
We must now ask ourselves why nominal predicates would be allowed to head-move in Irish, but not in English. The crucial difference between English and Irish, I claim, is that in Irish, nominal predicates are allowed to bear inflectional features (see Déchaine (1993) and Schmitt (1992) for related discussion). This contrasts with all English nominal predicates which require the support of some semantically null verb to bear the inflectional features. In Irish, the nominals are allowed to bear inflectional features directly (in a sense to be defined more formally in chapter 6). Given the fact that I claim the distinction between Tá and Is is one of feature marking, we might expect to find lexically-marked exceptions. This is the case in Irish. The exceptional adjectives and PPs which are discussed above are examples of predicates that are lexically marked as being allowed to bear inflectional features.

We can ask ourselves if there is any evidence for the assertion that nominal predicates in Irish bear inflection. First, we have the simple word order evidence. For

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24 Again, I will deal with the head movement of phrasal categories in chapter 5.
25 This is presumably ØTense in the sense of Déchaine (1993). For more discussion on the inflectional behaviour of NPs, see Musan (forthcoming) and Endo (1994)
26 Crosslinguistic evidence for the claim that nominal predicates can bear inflectional features comes from the tense and agreement morphology that appears on Salish nominal predicates. Take, for example, the word meaning "you were a chief":

si'em=IIE=sx
noble=past=2nomin
"You were a chief"

See Jelinek and Demers (1994) for more discussion. See also Fassi Fehri (1993) for discussion of related Arabic facts.
both verbs and indefinite nominal predicates the word order is consistently a particle, a predicate and then the subject. Given that the clause initial position, immediately after the complementizer particle, is a position usually reserved for inflected verbs in Irish (as discussed in chapter 3) and this positioning is due to movement for a kind of inflectional feature checking, it follows that the appearance of nominal predicates in this position may well be due to the fact that they must check inflectional features in the inflectional complex.

Similar evidence comes from small clauses. Under the assumption that small clauses do not have a tense projection, nominal predicates should not be allowed with them. In Irish, the complementizer Agus ‘while/since/and’ introduces small clauses.

41) Agus [é i gCalafóirnia]...
And him in California
“And he is/was in California”

In keeping with the above prediction, nominal predicates are not allowed with Agus.

42) *agus [é dliodóir]
and him lawyer
“And he is/was a lawyer”

This is consistent then with the notion that nominal predicates in Irish bear inflectional features. Since small clauses have no inflectional complex, the inflectional features on the nominal predicates have nothing to check against. This accounts for the ungrammaticality of (42).

To summarize, then, Tá 27 is found with predicates that can't bear inflectional features. It is a real verb which supports such features. In contrast, in the Is constructions, the predicate nominal28 itself bears the inflectional features and undergoes head movement so there is no need for a dummy auxiliary verb for inflectional support.

27I have not given here an analysis of the verb tá and its behaviour. This is more for reasons of time and space than for lack of analysis. Briefly, Tá, after Hoekstra and Mulder (1990), is a real unaccusative verb which takes a small clause complement (Stowell 1983, 1991, Heggie 1988, cf. in contrast Williams 1983) Like any other verb, Tá raises through the inflectional complex to check its φ−features. This derives the correct word order for clauses using the tá construction.

28See however, chapter 5 for a discussion of equative constructions.
4.3 Why the apparent stage/individual level split?

We have now established that the distinction between *Is* and *Tá* constructions is not one based on the semantic stage/individual level distinction, but rather is based upon what elements can bear inflectional features and undergo raising in the syntax. One problem remains before us, however, that being Doherty’s initial observation that all predicates found with *Is* are individual level. How can we account for this? I suggest that this follows straightforwardly from how stage level predicates are to be represented in the syntax. I claim, in a view of the stage/individual level distinction very different from that in Diesing (1992), that Davidsonian event arguments are introduced by light verbs. Event arguments distinguish stage from individual level predicates. If event arguments are linked to the presence of a light verb, their absence in *Is* constructions which lack any verbs light or otherwise, is unsurprising. Let us see how this works.

Recall from above the distribution of interpretations with the two constructions. *Is* only allows individual level predicates. *Tá* allows both:

43) a) *Is* dochtúir Cathal
    C doctor Cathal
    "Cathal is a doctor" (individual level)

b) *Tá* Cathal ina shuí
    Be Cathal in.his sitting
    "Cathal is sitting" (stage)

c) *Tá* Cathal {cliste, mór, ard}
    Be Cathal clever.big, tall
    "Cathal is {clever/big/tall}" (all individual level)

This is summarized in (44)

44) |    | *Is* | *Tá* |
    |---|-----|-----|
    | stage level | * | ✓ |
    | individual level | ✓ | ✓ |

What we can note about this distribution is that stage level readings are only allowed with a true verbal auxiliary. I claim that there is a direct causal relationship here: the stage level
reading is directly correlated to the presence of the auxiliary verb. The lack of a light verb in *Is* constructions will account for the lack of stage level readings in these constructions.

Let us adopt Kratzer's (1988) claim that stage level predicates differ from individual predicates in possessing an event argument which delimits the property being attributed in time and space. Further, let us adopt the claim, of Déchaine (1993) and Noonan (1993), that all arguments are introduced by their own verbal head (see also Larson (1988) and the authors listed in chapter 3 who propose the split VP hypothesis). Following Harley (forthcoming), let us extend this to event arguments as well.

The structures that would be produced by a predicate which takes *Is* (bears inflectional features directly) and by one that requires verbal support from *Tá* are seen (45) (omitting all irrelevant details):

45)

a) \[\begin{array}{c}
\text{IP} \\
I \\
\text{XP} \\
\text{subj} \\
X' \\
X \\
\ldots \\
\end{array}\]

beats inflectional features directly

b) \[\begin{array}{c}
\text{IP} \\
I \\
\text{V} \\
\text{V'} \\
X' \\
\ldots \\
\text{Tá} \\
\text{subj} \\
X' \\
X \\
\ldots \\
\end{array}\]

needs verbal support

If event arguments can only be introduced via a light verb, it follows that event arguments can only appear in sentences that have light verbs. *Is* sentences never have light verbs,

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29Kratzer actually does not claim that this is an "event" argument *per se*, but rather that this is simply a spatiotemporal argument. There seems to me to be no significant difference between the two so I will use the stronger "event" terminology here.

30I will remain agnostic here about whether this event argument is in some way linked to external arguments in general or to aspect. See Harley (forthcoming) and Schmitt (1992) for more discussion.

31An obvious problem with this kind of account is the fact that stage level predicates can appear in small clauses, where there is no light verb. Alec Marantz points out to me that the stage-levelness of a small clause predicate seems to be determined by the eventhood of the predicate which dominates it. For example,
therefore they never can have event variables, and thus never have a stage level interpretation. *Is* predicates simply have no place to generate an event argument. The simplified structures for the *Is* construction and the two interpretations of *Tá* are summarized in (46):

\[46) \begin{align*}
\text{a) }& \text{[CP Is [IP X_i [XP subj [X' t_i ...]]]]} & \text{Is construction, no event argument} \\
\text{b) }& \text{[IP Tá [VP [v' t_i [XP subj [X' X ...]]]]]} & \text{Tá, individual level, no event} \\
\text{c) }& \text{[IP Tá [VP L [v' t_i [XP subj [X' X ...]]]]]} & \text{Tá, stage level, event argument introduced by Tá}
\end{align*}\]

The light verb may or may not introduce the event argument, this is presumably a feature of the predicate which it selects.

This account of the stage/individual correlations explains both why stage level predicates are never found with *Is* and why *Tá* allows both interpretations. Stage level delimiting events are only found with light verbs. In the system described above in section 4.2, the light verb *Tá* is only found when the non-verbal predicate cannot bear inflectional features itself. It is not surprising, then, that stage level interpretations are only found with these predicates.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I’ve provided an account of two phenomena associated with non-verbal predication in Modern Irish. First, I showed that the *Is* morpheme and its allomorphs are not verbs, but pattern like the preverbal complementizer particles. I then claimed that the difference between the *Tá* and *Is* construction lies not in the semantic notions of Carlson's (1977) Stage/Individual level distinction, but rather follows from what elements can undergo head movement for feature checking. Those predicates that cannot bear inflectional features require the verbal auxiliary for support of those features. Those eventive *see* and *make* matrix predicates take stage level small clauses, stative *consider* takes individual level small clause predicates. It thus seems that small clauses may inherit event arguments from the matrix clause they are contained in, and require no light verb.
that can bear inflectional features appear with the *Is* particles and themselves undergo head movement through the inflectional complex for feature checking. Finally, I showed that apparent correlations between *Is* and *Tá* and the individual/stage level distinction was an artifact of the fact that event arguments can only be introduced in the specifier of light verbs like *Tá*.

There are several issues left unresolved in this chapter. First, and most importantly, I have provided no account of the word order facts of the equative construction. I have also provided no account or description of the case and agreement properties of *Is* constructions. In the next chapter we will turn to these issues. In addition, I have yet to discuss the behavior of complex phrasal predicates. This will be the focus of chapter 6.