

Prepositions in Brythonic Celtic: Stability and Contact-Induced Change

Kevin Rottet

Prepositions represent a significant part of what is distinctive about the Celtic languages. Many prepositions trigger initial consonant mutations (Breizh ‘Brittany’ but da Vreizh ‘to Brittany’); simple prepositions are ‘conjugated’ for pronominal complements (evit ma breur ‘for my brother’ but evitañ ‘for him’). There are several patterns of complex prepositions including one in which pronominal complements take the form of possessive infixes (a-raok ‘before’ but en ho raok ‘before you’, cf. ho ‘your’). Additionally, language contact, with English (in the case of Welsh) and French (where Breton is concerned) has played a role in recent times. For instance, Breton expressions for ‘up’ and ‘down’ (d’al laez ‘to the top’, d’an traoñ ‘to the base’) are only weakly grammaticalized whereas in Welsh, i fyny ‘to a mountain’ and i lawr ‘to a floor’ are highly grammaticalized and have undergone nearly total interlingual identification with the English words up and down, becoming full-fledged prepositions (and not just adverbs), and even competing with the traditional pattern of phrases of bodily posture, e.g. the contact-induced eistedd i lawr ‘to sit down’ versus the traditional mynd ar ei eistedd lit. ‘to go on his sitting’.