

The usage of the historical present in Old Irish narrative prose

MA Thesis

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RMA Medieval studies

Track Celtic

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List of Abbreviations

It should be noted that all labels used in my research are given capitals to make them distinct from the general terms with the same name (e.g. ‘Perfective’ is a label and does not necessarily correspond to the general concept ‘perfective’).

SC	supra-clausal
cop.	copula
dict.	dictionary
DIL	dictionary of the Irish Language
dir. sp.	direct Speech
fut.	future
imperf.	imperfect
impv.	imperative
Lat.	Latin
neg.	negation
OIr.	Old Irish
P	perfect (aspect)
pass.	passive
perf.	perfect (verbal form)
poet.	poetic
PP	pluperfect (aspect)
pres.	present
pres. cons.	consuetudinal present
pret.	preterite
quest.	question
sec. fut.	secondary future
IC	intra-clausal
SP	simple past
subj.	subjunctive
subst.	substantive verb
VI	verb inherent

Chapter 1: Subject and Scope

The problem that I have tried to tackle in this thesis is the following. In Old Irish narrative texts, a large number of present tense verbs occur in a past tense context. This means that the present tense is used to describe an action occurring in the past. These occurrences of present tense verbal forms in a past tense context are called historical presents. In this thesis, it has been my goal to explain why and how present tense forms are used to express the past.

The occurrence of the historical present in Old Irish has only rarely been the subject of research. Thurneysen (1946)¹ briefly touches upon the subject by stating: “In narrative prose it [the present tense] is very frequently used as historic present, but not after *ni* ‘not’ and hardly ever after *con* ‘so that’²”. He merely observes the fact that this phenomenon occurs but does not delve into the matter any further.

Tristram (1983)³ did touch upon the subject more extensively. She investigated the historical present in Old and Middle Irish by looking at both narrative prose and poetry. I shall discuss her findings and their influence on my own research in chapter four.

McCana (1994)⁴ investigated the usage of the substantive verb in relation to the historical present. I shall take his article into account when discussing the usage of the substantive verb in chapter ten.

The historical present is not unique to Old Irish. The historical present in Indo-European languages has been described by Kiparsky (1968).⁵ However, as Tristram (1983) already mentioned,⁶ his theories do not seem to add up when applied to Old and Middle Irish. I shall come back to this in chapter four.

My thesis revolves around the aforementioned issue. I hope to propose a valid hypothesis regarding the usage of the present tense in past contexts. In order to be able to propose such a hypothesis I shall investigate five categories of verbal forms used to express a past event or state:⁷

¹ Rudolf Thurneysen, *Grammar of Old Irish* (Dublin 1946)

² Thurneysen, *Grammar*, 331

³ Hildegard Tristram, *Tense and Time in Early Irish Narrative*, Innsbrucker Beiträge Zur Sprachwissenschaft, Vorträge un Kleinere Schriften 32, (Innsbruck 1983)

⁴ Proinsias Mac Cana, ‘The Historical Present and the Verb ‘To Be’’, *Ériu* 45 (Dublin 1994)

⁵ Paul Kiparsky, ‘Tense and Mood in Indo-European Syntax’, *Foundation of Language* vol. 4 no. 1 (1968), 30-57

⁶ Tristram, *Tense and Time*, 8-11

⁷ More information about these five categories will be given in the chapters allotted to the different categories.

1. Present tense verbs used in a past context (i.e. historical presents).
2. Perfect forms (usually represented by preterite forms preceded by the prefix *ro-*)
3. Preterite forms which are not preceded by the prefix *ro-*.
4. Imperfect forms.
5. Forms of the substantive verb.

Next, I shall analyze the data gathered on these five categories. In this analysis I shall focus on the role that these verbal forms play in the sequence of events of a narrative. For this analysis, I take into account both context and the inherent properties of the verbs. I shall discuss my methodology in more detail in chapter five.

In order to obtain a representative corpus of material I have gathered all the verbs in the so-called Recension I of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, edited by Cecile O’Rahilly (1976)⁸. I shall discuss this source in more detail in the next chapter.

I have put all the verbs in this text in a database. This database takes the form of a table with information on several aspects of every encountered verb. I shall discuss this in depth in chapter five. These data form the basis for my hypotheses. I shall give multiple examples throughout this work from that database.

⁸ Cecile O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge; Recension I* (Dublin 1976)

Chapter 2: The Corpus

For this research I have studied the verbs in the so-called Recension I of the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*. As my main reference I have used the edition of this text by O’Rahilly (1976). In this chapter I shall discuss the text and give information about the manuscripts involved. I shall also explain why this text is suitable for my research.

The *Táin Bó Cúailgne* describes the adventures and deeds of all factions involved in a war between Ulster and Connacht. One of the main characters is *Cú Chúlainn*, a young boy who singlehandedly tries to stop the army of *Medb*, the queen of Connacht⁹.

The *Táin Bó Cúailgne* is found in numerous Irish manuscripts. These manuscripts have been divided in three versions, or recensions¹⁰. In this thesis I focus on the first recension.

Recension I comprises a multitude of small stories depicting short events. This string of short stories forms a detailed and complex storyline. The text consists of 4159 lines in the edition of O’Rahilly (1976).

Recension I has been preserved in four manuscripts. The text that I investigated (i.e. the edition by O’Rahilly (1976)) is mainly derived from two of those manuscripts: the *Lebor na hUidre*¹¹ and the *Yellow Book of Lecan*¹². O’Rahilly (1976) gives variations where the manuscripts diverge, presenting me with an opportunity to compare both manuscripts with regards to the tense of the verb used. There seems to be no variation in usage of tense between the two manuscripts whatsoever.

The *Lebor na hUidre* is the oldest surviving manuscript of this text and is dated to around 1100. It has been written by two main scribes. This manuscript does not contain the whole text. Only the first 2546 lines have been preserved. O’Rahilly (1976) states that: “it is obvious that U [Lebor na hUidre] is a compilation. The compiler quotes throughout ‘from another version’ or ‘according to other books’ i.e. manuscripts. His reference to ‘books’ shows that his sources were written ones, not oral.”¹³ Although the text is a compilation of different sources, the language is quite uniform.

⁹ For a more elaborate summary of the tale, cf. J. P. Mallory (ed.), *Aspects of the Táin* (Belfast 1992) 9-28

¹⁰ Mallory, *Aspects of the Táin*, 31-32

¹¹ Bergin and Best (ed.), *Lebor na Huidre* (Dublin 1929) ll. 4479-6722

¹² Strachan and O’Keeffe, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Dublin 1912)

¹³ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, viii

The Yellow Book of Lecan was written in the late 14th century. Despite its late composition it is regarded as containing the same version of the Táin as the text in the Lebor na hUidre. The Yellow Book contains by far the largest part of the Táin of any of the four manuscripts. It ranges from line 200 to the end (line 4159).

I have chosen to analyze this text for five reasons. First of all, it is a large text, offering me a lot of data. Secondly, the language of the text has been dated to the 9th century¹⁴. This means that the language found in the text is (late) Old Irish. As it is my goal to research the usage of the historic present in Old Irish, this long text suits my linguistic goals perfectly. Thirdly, the style of the text (i.e. a collection of short stories or events) contains episodes of different contextual and temporal settings. In this way I have been able to gather verbs from all kinds of contexts like battles, conversations, the playing of games, etc. This enables me to create statements on how different kinds of verbs were used in Old Irish narrative prose in general. Fourthly, the text has been edited very clearly by O’Rahilly (1976), which aided me immeasurably when analyzing the text. The last reason why I used this text is because its counterpart, Recension II, is thought to be a later version and written in Middle Irish¹⁵. It would be very interesting to be able to compare these two texts in the future. Even though I do not make such a comparison in this thesis it is something that I hope to be able to do in the near future.

¹⁴ Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Halle 1921)

¹⁵ Cf. Cecile O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge; from the Book of Leinster*, Irish Text Society xlix (Dublin 1967) xiv-xxxvi

Chapter 3: The Old Irish verbal system

In this chapter I shall present a concise overview of the Old Irish verbal system. I shall limit myself to the aspects of grammar that are relevant to the topic of this thesis. For any further reading, I refer to McCone (1987) and Thurneysen (1946).

The Old Irish language has a conjugated verbal system. In Old Irish this means that every verb has different forms for different persons, tenses, moods, etc. Old Irish has 6 persons: first person singular, second person singular, third person singular, first person plural, second person plural and third person plural. Apart from this, the Old Irish verb has several characteristics that I shall discuss now.

§3.1 Active, passive and deponent voice

In Old Irish distinction is made between Active, Passive and Deponent verbal forms. Active verbs are verbal forms that have a subject that carries out the action of the verb (e.g. ‘**Loeg goes** to Tara’, ‘Loeg’ is the subject of ‘goes’ and performs the action). Passive verbal forms are used to indicate that the grammatical subject is the object of the action or the effect of the verb (‘**Loeg is carried** to Tara’, ‘Loeg’ is the grammatical subject of ‘is carried’ but is the object of the action, he does not perform the action). The third distinction is called deponent. Deponent indicates that a verbal form has the inflectional endings of a passive verb but the meaning of an active verb.

§3.2 Five verbal stems

There are five verbal stems that are used to compose the different tenses and moods:

1. The indicative stem is used to form the present indicative, imperfect and imperative.
2. The subjunctive stem is used to form the present subjunctive and the past subjunctive.
3. The future stem is used to form the future and conditional verbal forms.
4. The preterite active stem is used for both the active preterite and the active perfect.
5. The preterite passive stem is used for the passive preterite and the passive perfect.

These five stems form the basic element of the Old Irish verbal system. They are followed by a set of endings indicating the different persons, tenses and moods. The difference between these stems depends on whether the verb is Weak or Strong. Weak inflection is what could be

seen as the “regular” productive type of verbal inflection of Old Irish.¹⁶ Strong verbs show considerable alteration from one inflectional stem to another (e.g. the difference between the indicative stem *gu(i)d-* in pres. 3 sg. *guidid* vs. the subjunctive stem *ge(i)ss-* in pres. subj. 3 sg. *geiss* of the strong verb *guidid* ‘asks’).

§3.3 Absolute and Conjunct

Old Irish has two verbal forms for every person, in every tense and every mood. These two different verbal forms are called Absolute and Conjunct. Absolute verbal forms are independent simple verbs, as they are never preceded by a conjunct particle or compounded with a preverb. Conjunct verbal forms are so-called dependent verbal forms. They are always preceded by a conjunct particle, or compounded with a preverb or preverbs¹⁷.

An example of an absolute verbal form is *beirid* ‘carries’. The conjunct verbal form of this verb is *-beir*, as with the negative particle *ní* in *ní-beir* ‘does not carry’.

§3.3.1 *ro*-forms and other perfect forms

As a rule perfect verbal forms are created by placing the particle *ro-* in front of a preterite verbal form (which is therefore in its conjunct form). An example of this is the Old Irish first person singular preterite active form *marbsu* ‘I killed’ which gives *ro-marbus* ‘I have killed’ when used as a perfect verbal form. There are some irregular verbs that have suppletive verbal forms for the perfect. An example of this is the perfect of *téit* ‘goes’. The perfect form is *do-cuaid* ‘has gone’ where the preterite verbal form is *luid* ‘went’. Thurneysen (1946) mentions that “in the course of the ninth century **ro**-forms come to be used in narrative also.”¹⁸ This means that the meaning of *ro-* as indicating a perfect verbal form is disappearing as Old Irish moves towards Middle Irish. The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is said to have been composed in the ninth century, so we would expect to find some evidence of the diminishing of the semantic load of *ro-* in the text¹⁹. It is therefore possible that perfect verbal forms have a meaning that is similar to the meaning of preterite verbal forms in the *Táin*. I will discuss the meaning that the various perfect forms in the *Táin* represent in chapter 9.

¹⁶ Kim McCone, *The Old Irish Verb* (Maynooth 1987), p. 24

¹⁷ More on the verbal particle *ro-* in §3.3.1

¹⁸ Thurneysen, *Grammar*, p. 341

¹⁹ I shall discuss this in detail in chapter 9

§3.4 Simple and Compound verbs

Another important feature of the Old Irish verbal system is the difference between simple and compound verbs. Simple verbs are verbal forms that are not compounded with a preverb.

When simple verbs are independent they have an absolute form. An example of such a simple verb is *beirid* ‘carries’. Compound verbs are verbal forms which are composed of a verbal stem + one or several preverbs. These verbs use the conjunct form discussed above. An example of a compound verb is *as-beir* ‘says’. Preverbal particles influence the meaning of verbal forms (as can be seen when looking at the difference in meaning of *beirid* and *as-beir*).

In this thesis I shall not delve into the matter of what kind of influence different verbal particles have on verbal forms. I have put compound verbs and simple verbs together and exclusively looked at the translation presented by DIL.

§3.5 Copula and the Substantive verb

In Old Irish there are two ways to express the verb ‘to be’. The copula is used when the object of the verb is a noun, an adjective or a pronoun (this is called the predicate). The substantive verb is used in all other cases. An example of a sentence that would have a form of the copula in Old Irish is ‘Conchobar is a king’. An example of a sentence that would have a form of the substantive verb in Old Irish is ‘Conchobar is at Tara’ where ‘at Tara’ is not considered to be the predicate, as it is not a noun, adjective or a pronoun.

The forms of the copula and the substantive verb in Old Irish are irregular (as they are in many languages).

Chapter 4: Other Publications

In this chapter I shall discuss the publications that touch upon the topic of this thesis. The subject of the historical present in Old Irish has not been covered often. I shall begin with the publication by Kiparsky (1968) regarding the historical present in Indo-European languages. Then I shall turn to the publication by Tristram (1983), which focusses solely on Medieval Irish. I shall also shortly cover the article by Mac Cana (1994), although I shall discuss his theory regarding the verb ‘to be’ in more detail in chapter ten.

§4.1 Kiparsky (1968)

In his article, Kiparsky (1968) is the first to delve deeper into the subject. He discusses the usage of the historical present in several Indo-European languages. Old Irish is one of those languages. According to Kiparsky (1968), the historical present is not semantically different from past tense verbal forms. He sees the historical present as being of syntactical importance. “Everything points to its [the historical present] being an underlying past tense, and its conversion into the present tense in the surface structure must be governed by a syntactic rule, evidently some form of conjunction reduction, which optionally reduces repeated occurrences of the same tense to the present.”²⁰ He then gives a schematic sequence where a sentence started by a past tense verb, followed by so-called zero tense verbal forms. According to Kiparsky (1968), these zero tense verbal forms are realized morphologically as present tense verbal forms.

§4.2 Tristram (1983)

Tristram (1983) does not agree with Kiparsky (1968). She states that “Kiparsky substantiates his thesis with a small number of examples from a variety of languages, notably from Vedic Sanskrit, Greek, Old Norse, and Old Irish. I pass on his Sanskrit, Greek, and Old Norse examples, but his Irish material suffers from such grave shortcomings that it is difficult to accept his conclusion.”²¹ She then continues with the point that Kiparsky (1968) “confines himself to considering the alternation Pret... Pres..., in this order.”²² Tristram (1983) remarks that this alternation mentioned by Kiparsky (1968) almost never occurs in Old Irish. Old Irish seems to behave completely opposite to the thesis of Kiparsky (1968). Tristram (1983)

²⁰ Kiparsky, *Tense and Mood*, pp. 33-4

²¹ Tristram, *Tense and Time*, p. 8

²² Idem.

correctly states that “the preterite in subordinate *co*-clauses after a preceding main clause in the present tense is very frequent.”²³

Tristram (1983) presents stylistic foregrounding as the function of the historical present. “The historical present is used, I take it, metaphorically in Middle Irish as a device to enhance narrative tension.”²⁴ I shall now present one of her examples and discuss it.

***Do-t(h)ét** Fergus ass la sodain a tríchait láech, in da Fergus ocus Dubthach, co mbátar oc Áth Fénnai i tuasciurt críchi Ciarraige. **Tíagait** don dún. **Ferthair** failte friu.*²⁵

‘Thereupon Fergus **sets forth**, thirty warriors altogether with the two Ferguses and Dubthach, and they *arrived* at Áth Fénnai in the north of the land of the Ciarraigi. They **go** to the fort. Welcome **is offered** to them.’²⁶

Tristram states the following regarding this example: “I personally feel that the change of tense begins with **do-t(h)ét**. It introduces the definite onset of the foregrounding of the action. The next (*co*-) clause features a message of less immediate import to the plot than the following two verbs (**tíagait** and **ferthair**). This is enumerative style [**do-t(h)ét, tíagait, ferthair**] and it presents the bare thread of the plot by placing the verbs in the very foreground.”²⁷

This reasoning does not entirely convince me. It is difficult to research the importance of a given verbal form to the text. That importance leans heavily on our interpretation of the text and what we, as readers, think is important. Tristram (1983) sees the usage of the present tense as a stylistic element, a method of foregrounding. Such a stylistic element is intrinsically difficult to demonstrate or refute. I have therefore endeavoured to tackle the problem from another angle in this thesis. I shall discuss my methodology and terminology in more detail in the next chapter.

§4.3 Mac Cana (1994)

The next publication that I wish to discuss is the article by Mac Cana (1994). He does not delve deeper into the matter that Tristram (1983) discussed but focuses on one feature of the historical present: the verb ‘to be’. He does discuss some elements important to the historical present in general as well. I shall discuss his theories and their implication for my hypotheses in chapter ten, when I focus on the substantive verb.

²³ Tristram, *Tense and Time*, p. 8

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 12

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 13

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 14

²⁷ *Idem*.

Chapter 5: Methodology and Terminology

In this chapter I shall discuss the foundation of my research. This foundation is in the form of a large database²⁸ containing all the verbs in Recension I of the Táin Bó Cúailnge. Each verb has been labeled according to its inherent and contextual properties. In this chapter I shall discuss all labels and present examples from the database.

§5.1 The Database

The table below is a section of the database. I have divided the table into 9 columns.

Verb	Translation	Tense/Mood	Dict. Form	page/line	Research Exceptions	VI label	IC label	SC label
Tarcomlad	Was gathered	Perf.	do-ecmalla	1/2		Atelic	Terminative	Perfective
hetha	went	pret.	ethaid	1/3		Atelic	Continuous	?
foíte	sent	pret.	foídid	1/3		Telic	Iterative/ Terminative	Perfective
Tecait	come	pres.	do-icc	1/7		Atelic	Continuous/I terative	Imperfective
co mbáatar	Until they were	pret.	attá	1/7	Subst.			
Ní	is not	pres.	is	1/16	Dir. Sp., Cop., Neg.			

I shall now discuss every column separately.

§5.2 The Verb, Translation, Tense/Mood, Dict. Form and page/line columns

The first column is labeled **Verb**. In this column I present the verbal form found in the edition of O’Rahilly (1976). Although I do not cover certain verbal categories in this thesis (see below), I have included all verbal forms in this table.

The second column, **Translation**, contains my translation of the verbal form given in **Verb**. I have chosen to use my own translation of the verbal form for two reasons:

- a. Even though I use the edition by O’Rahilly (1976), her translation of the text does not correspond completely with the Old Irish words used. In order to achieve a fluid and coherent translation she has sometimes chosen to loosely adapt the sentence to fit the English language better. Certain verbs disappeared or changed position in the translated sentence; this would have had a detrimental effect on my research if used. In order to gather a comprehensible and complete database I needed an accurate translation of every verbal form on its own.
- b. I have tried to remain as close as possible to the translation presented by the Dictionary of

²⁸ The database is included in this essay as appendix A.

the Irish Language (DIL)²⁹. The DIL, however, often presents several or even numerous possible translations. In these cases I had to choose one of those possible translations which would fit best in the given context. This was necessary because my research depends on context as well as inherent verbal qualities.

In order to accomplish the task of translating all verbal forms I looked at both the translation by O’Rahilly (1976) and the DIL. I used O’Rahilly (1976) because her translation is adapted to the context surrounding the verbal form. I then used the DIL to see which translations were possible with each given verbal form.

The third column, **Tense/mood**, contains the (abbreviated) indications of tense and mood of the verbal form. For this I leaned primarily on four important publications: The DIL, Strachan (1949)³⁰, McCone (1987)³¹ and Thurneysen (1946).

The fourth column, **Dict. Form**, contains the dictionary heading of this verb as presented by DIL. I have added this column to be able to group verbal forms per verb (e.g. I could investigate all the different forms of *fo-ceird* found in the text).

The fifth column presents both page and line of the verbal form in O’Rahilly (1976). This information is presented for easy reference to the edition.

§5.3 The Research Exceptions column

The sixth column, **Research Exceptions**, contains the first set of labels. These labels represent the different categories of verbal forms that I do not include in my research. In order to discuss this I shall now briefly cover the scope of my research. I shall be investigating the five categories of the Old Irish verbs used to represent the past. My focus is on narrative. Comrie (1985) gives the following definition of a narrative: “a narrative is by definition an account of a sequence of chronologically ordered events (real or imaginary), and for a narrative to be well-formed it must be possible to work out the chronological order of events from the structure of the narrative with minimal difficulty; this constraint of minimal difficulty means that the easiest way to present these events is with their chronological order

²⁹ E. G. Quin (red.), *Dictionary of the Irish language, based on mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials*, compact edition (Dublin 1990)

³⁰ John Strachan, *The Old Irish Paradigms; and selections of the Old Irish glosses* (Dublin 1949)

³¹ Kim McCone, *The Early Irish Verb* (Maynooth 1987)

directly reflected in the order of presentation.”³²

I shall restrict myself to those verbs that represent parts of a sequence of events in the past. Therefore I shall not be investigating the past subjunctive. Although the past subjunctive has a past tense it does not participate in a narrative like indicative verbs. Thurneysen (1946) states that the main functions of the subjunctive are “to denote that a particular action is willed, wished, or commanded”, “to indicate uncertainty” and that it is used “in indirect questions”³³. These functions do not constitute elements of a narrative sequence of events.

I have also decided to exclude the forms of the copula. This is because the forms of the copula stand apart from the other verbs. The copula has no apparent lexical meaning and, as such, plays no role in a research mostly based on context and sequence of events.

As I focus solely on narrative sections of the text I shall also not include direct speech or poetry. These two categories have been excluded for similar reasons. The main argument to exclude direct speech and poetry from my research is their lack of sequences of events.

Direct speech mainly consists of short statements. There are cases where a longer sequence of events is expressed but these are so few in number that I have chosen not to include them in my analysis for the sake of convenience.

I have excluded poetry as, like direct speech, it rarely depicts a sequence of events. In the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* the main part of the poems are descriptions of a person, object or a single event. These descriptive poems are therefore not relevant to my research.

I have also chosen to exclude verbs which contain a negation. I have chosen to do so because negative verbs do not participate in the sequence of events of the narrative and have no temporal duration. Thurneysen (1946) indicates that the negative particle *ní* is never used together with an historical present: “In narrative prose it [the present tense] is very frequently used as historic present, **but not after ni ‘not’** and hardly ever after *con* ‘so that’³⁴”.

Therefore it would be useless to include negative verbal forms in my research.

In the **Research Exception** column, these categories of verbs have been given their respective labels. In addition to these exceptions of my research I have added four additional labels in this column. The first is the label **Quest.**, which means that the verb is part of a question. I have chosen to use this label for future reference. It plays no role whatsoever in this thesis, but is solely there because I wished to be able to be able to scrutinize this type of direct speech in

³² Bernard Comrie, *Tense* (Cambridge 1985) 27

³³ Thurneysen, *Grammar*, 329

³⁴ Thurneysen, *Grammar*, 331

future studies.

I have also included the label **Subst.**, indicating that a verbal form is part of the substantive verb.³⁵ I have chosen to do so because the substantive verb will be discussed separately from the other verbal forms. The reason for this will become apparent in chapter ten.

There is also a label named **Pres.**, which is used when a present tense verb in a narrative section of text represents actual present tense and is not a historical present.

The last label in this column is **Lat.**, which specifies that a verb is written in Latin. I exclude these verbal forms as they are part of another language. There are thus eight labels that can be used in this column:

- **Poet.** : the verb is a part of a poem.
- **Cop.** : the verb is a form of the copula.
- **Dir. Sp.** : the verb is found in direct speech.
- **Lat.** : the verb is in Latin.
- **Neg.** : the verb contains a negation.
- **Quest.** : the verb is part of a question.
- **Subst.** : the verb is a form of the substantive verb.
- **Pres.** : the verb is a true present tense

A single verbal form can have several labels in the **Research Exceptions** column. An example of this is a sentence in direct speech where the verbal form is *ní*, the 3 sg. pres. negative form of the copula³⁶. It means ‘is not’. This verbal form would be entered into the database as follows:

Verb	Translation	Tense/Mood	Dict. form	page/line	Research Exceptions
Ní	is not	pres.	is	1/16	Dir. Sp., Cop., Neg.

³⁵ I have discussed the Old Irish verbal system in more detail in chapter 3.

³⁶ Idem.

As seen above, *ní*, in this context, has three labels in the **Research Exceptions** column. It occurs in direct speech, hence Dir. Sp.. It is a form of the copula and it is part of a negation, so Cop. and Neg. are also included in this column.

§5.4 The Verb-Inherent column

The seventh column, **VI label**, contains the so-called Verb-Inherent labels. These labels reflect the ‘aktionsart’ of the verbal form. This means that they express the general quality of a verb, not the specific meaning the verb has in its given sentence. In this column a verb is ascribed as being either Telic or Atelic. It is important to note that the labels Telic and Atelic are seen as an ‘aktionsart’, not as aspect. Comrie defines the difference between ‘aktionsart’ and aspect as follows: “The [...] distinction is between aspect as grammaticalisation of the relevant semantic distinctions, while aktionsart represents lexicalisation of the distinctions irrespective of how these distinctions are lexicalised; this use of aktionsart is similar to the notion of inherent meaning.”³⁷ Following this definition, I ascribe Telic or Atelic to verbs by judging their inherent qualities.

§5.4.1 Telic and Atelic

Binnick (1991) uses the following definition for telic and atelic verbs: “[telic is used for] expressions which have natural culminations, and *atelic*, for those which do not have to wait for a goal for their realization.”³⁸ Comrie (1976) formulates a telic situation as “a process that leads up to a well-defined terminal point, beyond which the process cannot continue.”³⁹ On atelic Situations Comrie further comments: “the situation described by [an atelic verb] has no such terminal point, and can be protracted indefinitely or broken off at any point.”⁴⁰ Binnick (1991) further explains that “Telicness serves to distinguish ‘performances’ (achievements in the wider sense, including accomplishments) from states or activities. Performances –achievements and accomplishments- involve a product, upshot, or outcome, something resultant. This is not necessarily the case with an activity, which ‘just happens’, nor with a state, which ‘just is’.”⁴¹

This “product, upshot, or outcome” is further discussed by Binnick (1991):

³⁷ Bernard Comrie, *Aspect: an introduction to the study of verbal aspect and related problems* (Cambridge 1976) p. 6n

³⁸ Robert I. Binnick, *Time and the Verb; a guide to Tense and Aspect* (Oxford 1991) 189

³⁹ Comrie, *Aspect*, 44

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 44

⁴¹ Binnick, *Time and the Verb*, 189

“The definition of telicness must take into account that what is crucial is not that there be a potential culmination of the *actual* process described, but rather that the phasic structure of the situation include a culminatory phase distinct from mere termination.”⁴² This means that the verb does not merely represent an ending of an action but an actual goal. If, for example, we use the verb ‘to sit down’, there is a culminatory phase (i.e. the sitting state that logically results from the sitting down).

§5.4.1.1 Definition of Telic

The definition I use for the label Telic is: the ‘aktionsart’ of a verb that presents an action as having an inherent goal. This inherent goal (Comrie (1976) ‘terminal point’, Binnick (1991) ‘culmination’) is a quality of a verb that is (normally) attained automatically by the performance of the verbal action itself. Additionally, a Telic verb should always have a possible culminatory phase. What I mean by this is that the possibility of a culmination has to be present in the inherent properties of a verb, but that it is not necessary for this culmination to be attained in the specific context of the verbal form found.

An example of a Telic verb is OIr. *benaid*, ‘strikes, kills’. The verb already contains the intrinsic goal of the action (i.e. the strike, that the strike has landed, the kill). On its own, this verb would contain both inherent goal and culmination.

§5.4.1.2 Definition of Atelic

The label Atelic is exactly the opposite of Telic: performance of the verbal action does not inherently lead to the attainment of a goal. The verb describes an action without alluding to an inherent goal or culmination.

An example of an Atelic verb is OIr. *téit*, ‘goes’. The verb ‘to go’ has no inherent goal, it merely describes a type of action. On its own, this verb does not contain information about the end of the action (e.g. arriving, stopping, etc.) or about the culminatory phase (having arrived, having stopped, etc.).

§5.5 The Intra-Clausal column

The eighth column, **IC Label**, contains the intra-clausal labels. I have called these labels intra-clausal because they represent the context of a given verbal form that I use to determine

⁴² Binnick, *Time and the Verb*, 192

the aspect of a verbal form. In order to ascertain the way different verbal forms were used in a narrative it is necessary to investigate the context in which they occur. The very reason for this thesis is the lack of information about aspect in Old Irish. In order to discover how aspect operates in the Old Irish verbal system, I have to look at the contextual ‘footprints’ of aspect in the interpretation of verbal forms. The context surrounding the verb may betray which aspect is a property of those verbal forms. Therefore all of the following labels are attributed to verbal forms because of the context of that verbal form in the narrative. The reason why I have called these labels intra-clausal is because, in the case of the following labels, the contextual information is usually presented in the clause in which the verbal form is found (e.g. ‘he walked for five hours’). This is in contrast with the labels I use in the last column, **SC**, which I shall clarify below.

Because the context is not always clear it can happen that a verb can receive multiple possible labels in the sentence inherent column. I shall give examples of this at the end of the discussion of the labels used in this column.

The labels used in this eighth column are:

§5.5.1 Continuous

Continuous is an aspect of a verbal form. It is also called durative. Comrie (1976) states that the continuous/ durative “simply refers to the fact that the given situation lasts for a certain period of time (or at least, is conceived of as lasting for a certain period of time).”⁴³ He then continues by discussing the difference between durative and punctual. My usage of the label Continuous differs from the view of Comrie (1976) in that I have narrowed the definition. My definition for the label Continuous is: the verbal form is Continuous if it represents an unrepeated event or state that lasts for a certain period of time and is a part of the sequence of events in the narrative⁴⁴.

This narrow definition follows Rassudova (1984) more closely, who presents a narrow definition of the term: “a single specific episode viewed in its extension.”⁴⁵

This narrow definition of the label is more suitable for my research, because it enables me to separate several kinds of Situations (e.g. iterative, habitual, distributive) that would otherwise

⁴³ Comrie, *Aspect*, 41

⁴⁴ As explained in chapter 1.

⁴⁵ Olga Petrovna Rassudova, *Aspectual usage in Modern Russian* (Moscow 1984) 16f

all fall under the broad definition of durative/continuous presented by Comrie (1976).

I shall now give an example of a Continuous verb (C):

‘Dothíagat (C) ass dano tar Iraid Culend ara bárach.’⁴⁶

‘On the morrow they went (C) over Iraid Culenn.’⁴⁷

In this example the verb *dothíagat* ‘they went’ indicates an event with a single, unrepeated action. The most important feature of this sentence is the knowledge that Iraid Culend is a region that would not be traversed instantaneously. Logic would suggest that the context of the verbal form is therefore a continuous action. The context of the sentence illustrates the going of a party over a certain region. Therefore it has been labeled Continuous.

§5.5.2 Terminative

The general definition of terminative is that it is an aspect that expresses a completed, concluded state or event expressed by the verb. This aspect has also been called culminative or resultative. According to Comrie (1976) it is used for “indicating the successful completion of a situation”⁴⁸. In my database, the label Terminative has been used for those verbs that follow the definition presented by Comrie (1976). When a verbal form represents a concluded action, I have labeled it Terminative. The difference between Telic and Terminative is that Telic verbs only indicate a possible culmination or end. Terminative verbs actually attain this culmination or end in the specific context of the verbal form. This means that there can be Telic verbs which are not Terminative. An example of a Telic verb which is not Terminative is in the sentence: “He dismounted but was stopped before his feet hit the ground”. In this example, ‘dismounted’ is a Telic verb as it has an inherent goal or culmination. It is, however, not Terminative, as the goal (the dismounted state) is not attained in this specific context. It is impossible for an Atelic verb to be Terminative, as there is no possible culmination to be attained.

The difference between Perfective and Telic will be discussed later when I discuss the label Perfective.

An example of a Terminative verb (Tm) in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is:

⁴⁶ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 27 ll. 869

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 149

⁴⁸ Comrie, *Aspect*, 20

*‘Tairbling (Tm) Cú Chulaind iarom hi nGrellaig Dolluid’*⁴⁹

‘Afterwards Cú Chulainn dismounted (Tm) (from his chariot) in Grellach Dolluid.’⁵⁰

In this example the verb *tairbling* ‘dismounted’ represents a clear concluded event. The dismounting is a successful result and as such I have given this verb the label Terminative.

§5.5.3 Iterative

Iterative is an aspect that expresses the repetition of an event or state. Comrie (1976) states that the iterative is used to “refer to a situation that is repeated.”⁵¹; it represents “the successive occurrence of several instances of the given situation”⁵². Binnick (1991) is slightly more elaborate and states: “A verb in an iterative form carries with it the (im)perfectivity of its base verb, but adds to it the meaning of repetition. In languages lacking explicitly iterative forms, verbs may either be inherently iterative (*chatter*) or may be given iterativity by a tense form (*be hitting*) or some contextual feature (*all day he fell asleep*).”⁵³ The label Iterative that I have used follows its general definition given above, it expresses the repetition of an event or state. This means that it can be a repeated action with a single object (e.g. repeatedly hitting an opponent), a repeated action which has multiple subjects or objects (e.g. twenty men kicking an opponent - this has also been called ‘distributive’) or a repetition of an action as a property of a time or person (e.g. it was usual for them to kick an opponent every day - also called ‘habitual’).

An example of a verb with the label Iterative (It) is:

*‘Focherdat (It) a trí cóecta bunsach fair 7 arsisetar (It) isin scíath slissen uli les-seom.’*⁵⁴

‘They threw their thrice fifty javelins at him, and they all stuck in his toy shield.’⁵⁵

In this example, the boys of Ulster throw their javelins at Cú Chulainn, who then catches these javelins with his shield. The first verb, *focherdat* ‘throw, cast’, can reasonably be interpreted as representing a distributive aspect. It is unlikely that all the javelins were cast in

⁴⁹ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 77 l. 2515

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 194

⁵¹ Comrie, *Aspect*, 42

⁵² Ibid, 27

⁵³ Binnick, *Time and the Verb*, 144

⁵⁴ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 14 ll. 423-4

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 136

one action. More likely is the scenario in which the boys throw javelins at Cú Chulainn in random order until they have thrown the mentioned ‘thrice fifty’ javelins. The next verb, *arsisetar* ‘remain, stick’, is even clearer than *focherdat*. It is extremely unlikely that all 150 javelins were stuck on his shield in one action. It is far more likely that the javelins kept getting stuck to the shield of Cú Chulainn until they were all stuck on it. For this reason I have labeled both verbs Iterative.

§5.6 The Supra-Clausal column

In the last column, **SC label**, I have two different labels to assign to a verbal form. These labels are Perfective and Imperfective. These two labels also represent the contextual property of different aspects of a verb. Perfective and Imperfective, however, belong to the supra-clausal (**SC**) column. As I shall explain below, the context needed to interpret a verbal form as being either Perfective or Imperfective reaches beyond the clause where the verbal form is found. Perfective and Imperfective are only established by looking at the sequence of events of the narrative. This chronological set of events offers the context we need when deciding whether a verb is concluded before the next verb occurs, whether two verbs occur simultaneously, etc. .

§5.6.1 Perfective and Imperfective

These two labels prove to be extremely important. The general definition of the two terms is stated by Comrie (1976): “the difference between perfective and imperfective meaning is [...] that the perfective looks at the Situation from outside, without necessarily distinguishing any of the internal structure of the Situation, whereas the imperfective looks at the Situation from inside, and as such is crucially concerned with the internal structure of the Situation, since it can both look backwards towards the start of the Situation, and look forwards to the end of the Situation, and indeed is equally appropriate if the Situation is one that lasts through all time, without any beginning and without any end.”⁵⁶

“[T]he term ‘perfective’ contrasts with ‘imperfective’ and denotes a situation viewed in its entirety, without regard to internal temporal constituency[.]”⁵⁷

Comrie (1976) further states that there have been several misconceptions about perfectivity:

⁵⁶ Comrie, *Aspect*, 4

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 12

a. “It is sometimes claimed that perfective forms indicate situations of short duration, while imperfective forms indicate situations of long duration. It is easy to find examples from individual languages that contradict this assertion, perhaps the clearest being where both perfective and imperfective forms can be used in referring to the same length of time, without any necessary implication of the duration being short or long.”⁵⁸

b. “Equally, the perfective cannot be defined as describing a situation with limited, as opposed to unlimited, duration; an hour, ten years, thirty years, are all limited periods, but [...] both perfective and imperfective forms can be used to describe such duration.”⁵⁹

c. “Related to the concept of perfectivity as indicating a short period of time is its characterization as indicating a punctual (i.e. point-like) or momentary situation. [...] While it is incorrect to say that the basic function of the perfective is to represent an event as momentary or punctual, there is some truth in the view that the perfective, by not giving direct expression to the internal structure of a Situation, irrespective of its objective complexity, has the effect of reducing it to a single point.”⁶⁰

He also discusses the common notion that perfectivity is used solely to indicate a completed action:

“One should note that the word at issue in this definition is ‘completed’, not ‘complete’: despite the formal similarity between the two words, there is an important semantic distinction which turns out to be crucial in discussing aspect. The perfective does indeed denote a complete Situation, with beginning, middle, and end. The use of ‘completed’, however, puts too much emphasis on the termination of the Situation, whereas the use of the perfective puts no more emphasis, necessarily, on the end of a Situation than on any other part of the Situation, rather all parts of the Situation are presented as a single whole.”⁶¹

§5.6.1.1 Definition of Perfective

My definition of the label Perfective is that the complete action of the verb has to occur before the action of a following verb starts. This means that, in the sequence of events of the narrative, Perfective verbal actions occur subsequently and form a chronological sequence of distinct temporally separate events. Perfective verbal forms represent single complete

⁵⁸ Comrie, *Aspect*, 17

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 17

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 17-18

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 18

Situation⁶². The perfective is used to present a complete Situation, and, as Comrie (1976) stated, this implies its completion, but does not stress that fact. I have chosen this focus on the following event (i.e. expressed by the following verb) because it enables me to determine whether the action represented by the verb is complete or not. Perfective events represent a complete Situation after which another Situation can occur which is chronologically subsequent in the narrative. I shall also look at the preceding verb, as a perfective verb also necessarily represents a started action (i.e. it should not only imply the culmination of the action, but also the inception.). It rarely occurs that the action of a verb does not start with the mentioning of that verb. It is, however, quite possible for two actions of verbs to take place simultaneously in the sequence of events of the narrative and thus being part of one temporal Situation.

I shall now give an example from the *Táin* illustrating this label (the ‘P’ marks Perfective verbs, the label ‘RE’ stands for a research exception, which I have explained above.).

‘Ro bútha (P) trá sin uli les-[s]ium ar galaib óenfir. Ó ro láiset (P) íarom a pupil hi Crónig, ro imráidset (P) cid dogéntais (RE) fri Coin Culaind.’⁶³

‘All these were killed (P) by him in single combat. Then when they had pitched (P) their tents in Crónech, they debated (P) as to what they should do (RE) about Cú Chulainn.’⁶⁴

In this example three events are described. First the killing perpetrated by Cú Chulainn. This event is complete (i.e. the killing has been done) before the next verb (*ro láiset*) occurs. We can deduce this conclusion from the logic of the Situation. It would be quite illogical for the pitching of the tents to occur at the same time as the killing. Therefore the verb represents a complete action. Hence the label Perfective. The second verb, *ro láiset* ‘they pitched’ is also complete before the following verb occurs (i.e. *ro imráidset* ‘they debated’). We can reasonably argue that the action of pitching their tents was concluded before the debate began. It should be noted that the two actions could possibly also have occurred simultaneously, but this seems far less likely to me, as the possibility is not logical for this Situation. The last verb, *ro imráidset*, is also complete. This cannot be seen in the example above but if we would turn to the text in the *Táin* we would see that the following sentence starts with a conversation made as a result of this discussion.

⁶² I shall discuss the term Situation in detail in §5.6.2

⁶³ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 48 ll. 1560-2

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 168

§5.6.1.2 Definition of Imperfective

The label Imperfective is the opposite of Perfective. It means that the event represented by the verb is not complete before the event of a following verb starts. The definition given above of imperfectivity by Comrie (1976) is exactly the definition I use for my label Imperfective.

Perfective represents a complete event, an event as a whole. Imperfective represents the opposite, an incomplete event, a fragment of the whole. As with the label Perfective, I primarily investigated the context of the event by scrutinizing the preceding and the following verb and the implied structure of events. If the given Situation is not completely represented by one single verbal form (e.g. because the action of the verbal form occurs simultaneously with a previously mentioned verb or if the event of the first verb had not finished before the following event occurred) then that verb received the label Imperfective.

I shall now give an example of a sequence of events involving an Imperfective verb.

‘Marbaid (I) nónbór díib 7 fácbait (I) cóeca cned fair-seom’⁶⁵

‘He killed (I) nine of them but they dealt (I) him fifty wounds’⁶⁶

In the example above two verbs, *marbaid* ‘kills’ and *fácbait* ‘strike, deal’, are clearly part of a narrative structure. It seems however that these events are not given in a chronological sequence. It would seem that the killing and the dealing of wounds would occur simultaneously, in which case the two verbs would describe parts of the same Situation. They would then be labeled Imperfective. The verbal form *marbaid* ‘kills’ would be the first verb to describe the Situation but it does not represent the complete Situation because *fácbait* ‘deal’ occurs within the temporal boundaries of that Situation.

§5.6.2 Situations

It is necessary to investigate one extra matter before we are able to turn to the examples from the database. I have used the term ‘Situation’ above with regard to the sequence of events.

This term means that one or more verbal forms belonging to the same Situation are parts of one single temporal span. The most obvious examples of such a Situation are two actions that occur simultaneously. In the example given above, two verbal forms (*marbaid* and *fácbait*) are both parts of an event that is not explicitly expressed (i.e. the battle). In these cases I call

⁶⁵ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 17 ll. 535-6

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 140

the unmentioned event a single Situation.

These Situations can also be comprised of temporally overlapping verbal forms or even closely connected concluded events. An Old Irish example of this is the following:

*'Fanópair-som (I) arapa 7 dobeir (I) a chend 7 a muicc laiss.'*⁶⁷

*'Nevertheless he attacked (I) and carried (I) off his head and his pig.'*⁶⁸

In this example a single Situation is started by the present tense verb *fanópair-som* 'attacks'. During this Situation another verb occurs. *Dobeir* 'carries' very probably forms the concluding part of the action represented by *fanópair-som*. These two verbs together therefore represent two parts of one single Situation and as such are labeled Imperfective, as both verbal forms do not represent a single complete Situation.

An example of a single Situation, which contains two complete actions, is the English sentence: "arriving at Tara, he threw his spear". In this sentence a close connection between "arriving" and "threw" is implied by the usage of the present participle. Note the difference between this sentence and "he arrived at Tara, he threw his spear". In this last sentence the connection between "arrived" and "threw" is far less close than in the former example. The first example presents one single Situation (i.e. the arrival is immediately followed by the throwing) where the second example presents two distinct Situations (i.e. the arrival is concluded and the throwing is performed after that act, but no real temporal closeness is implied). It is often very hard to determine this close connection of two actions in Old Irish, as Old Irish does not contain present participles.

§5.7 Unclear verbal forms

It often occurs that it is not possible to assign a verb with one of the labels mentioned in the **IC** and **SC** columns with complete certainty. This uncertainty is a logic consequence of this type of research. As I am investigating the contextual 'footprints' of verbal forms I rely completely on context. Context, however, is not always straightforward and clear. There are numerous cases where no additional information about the context is given beside the verbal form itself. To indicate this uncertainty, I have chosen to use two methods:

⁶⁷ O'Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 16 ll. 518-9

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 139

a. In the **IC** column I have chosen to give all the labels that are possible without choosing one as being preferable. A verb may therefore be labeled Continuous/Terminative, or Iterative/Terminative. An example of this is the following sentence:

‘Tossoí-som (Tm/C) iarum clár clé a c[h]arpait fri hEmain’⁶⁹

‘Then he turned (Tm/C) the left side of his chariot to Emain’⁷⁰

In this example the context of the turning is not completely clear. In this context it could be a continuous turning action whose effect endures through time. It could also very well be a short, concluded event. Because of this ambiguity, I described this verb as being Continuous/Terminative.

b. In the **SC** column I have used a lot of ?-labels. This is because the precise context of the events of the narrative cannot always be ascertained. It is not always clear whether the one action has been ended before the next one occurs. Certain events can overlap, happen simultaneously, interrupt, etc. The question mark indicates that the verb cannot be labeled either Imperfective or Perfective.

‘Dobeir (?) a fodb di sudiu 7 dobeir (?) na trí cind laiss inna charput, 7 asbert (?)’⁷¹

‘He carried (?) off [their] spoils and brought (?) the three heads with him in his chariot and said (?)’⁷²

In this example three events are described. The first event is the carrying off of the spoils, *dobeir*. This verb could represent two different possible events. The first possibility is that it represents an event which occurs simultaneously with the second *dobeir* ‘carried, brought’. In this way the spoils and the heads are carried as a single Situation. It could also represent a complete event, finishing before the next verb occurs. When viewed in this manner, the spoils were first carried to the chariot and only *after* this action was completed did he bring the three heads to the chariot. We cannot say for certain which of these two contextual meanings is the most accurate. I have therefore marked this verb (?). The second verb might be part of the Situation described by the first *dobeir*. It could also represent a separate, complete Situation.

⁶⁹ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 25 l. 806

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 147

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 23 ll. 753-4

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 146

So, again, I ascribed this verb as (?). The third verb, *asbert* 'said', has also received a question mark. This is because it is not clear whether the Situation begun by the second *dobeir* is in fact complete before *asbert* occurs. If this would not be the case, then *asbert* would be Imperfective. If *dobeir* were complete then *asbert* would be Perfective.

Chapter 6: The historical present

I shall begin this chapter by stating the hypothesis that I formulated after having analyzed the usage of historical presents in the Táin Bó Cúailnge. After having presented the hypothesis I shall present the different arguments I have found to support it, followed by a discussion of the arguments that could be raised against the hypothesis.

Hypothesis: the historical present is used to indicate an imperfective aspect (i.e. the event represented by the verb is not complete before the event of a following verb starts).

§6.1 The Database

The hypothesis above becomes apparent when we look at the data offered by the historical presents in the Táin Bó Cúailnge. When we look at the data offered by my database we see the following:

Verbal form:	Total:	Imperfective:	‘?’	Perfective
Historical present	599	68.8 % (412) ⁷³	29.5 % (177)	1.7 % (10)

These data seem to paint a straightforward picture. Almost 70 % of the historical presents are labeled Imperfective.

§6.2 Usage of the imperfective historical present

I shall now first discuss different types of sentences where historical presents occur frequently. I shall begin with sentences that contain a sequence of several consecutive historical presents. Then I shall discuss sentences which start with a historical present which is followed by Old Irish *co* ‘until, so that’. The third type of examples that I shall discuss is historical presents which are surrounded by non-present verbal forms. Another important point that I shall discuss are the sequences of events which are not simultaneous or temporally overlapping, but which do represent one Situation. I shall then finish with an explanation of the five Perfective verbal forms.

⁷³ The number between (...) stand for the absolute numbers of verbal forms found.

§6.2.1 Multiple historical presents representing one Situation.

I already showed an example of this kind of sequence in the former chapter. I shall repeat it here.

‘Marbaid (I) nónbór díib 7 fácbait (I) cóeca cned fair-seom’⁷⁴

‘He killed (I) nine of them but they dealt (I) him fifty wounds’⁷⁵

As discussed above, the two instances of the present tense (*marbaid* and *fácbait*) represent actions that took place simultaneously. The two verbal forms represent two distinct parts of that Situation (i.e. the fight). Therefore these two forms are imperfective, as they represent an internal part of a Situation, not an external view of two different Situations as a whole. In the Táin, the present tense is used consistently in these types of sentences. I shall now present all the clear examples of the simultaneous events that occur in the Táin. I should stress that these are not the only examples of this phenomenon, but that these are the examples which are contextually the most clear.

1. *‘Doberar (I) fín dó 7 doberar (I) Findabair for a desraid.’⁷⁶*

‘He was plied (I) with wine and Finnabair was placed (I) at his right hand.’⁷⁷

In this example a form of the verb *doberir* ‘gives, carries’ is used twice in one sentence. Both verbal forms are historical presents. It can be assumed that the wine is given (*doberar*) at the same time that Finnabair is placed (*doberar*) at his right hand. In this case the two actions expressed by the two verbs are very probably simultaneous.

2. *‘Dofuit (I) trícha ech oc sudiu 7 brisiter (I) trícha carpat and.’⁷⁸*

‘Thirty horses fell (I) in the attempt and thirty chariots were broken (I) there.’⁷⁹

This example again displays two events that are both elements of one single Situation. In this example, thirty chariots driven by thirty horses try to cross a bog. They fail miserably and perish. This Situation is described by two present tense verbs (*dofuit* ‘fall’ and *brisiter* ‘are

⁷⁴ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 17 ll. 535-6

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56 ll. 819-20

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 176

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26 ll. 830-1

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148

broken’). Therefore these two verbs represent two simultaneous internal parts of one single Situation.

3. *‘Téit (I) ass 7 berid (I) claidiub a arad laiss ina láim.’*⁸⁰

‘Fergus (I) went off, taking (I) his charioteer’s sword in his hand’⁸¹

In this example two verbs indicate two actions that take place simultaneously. Together they represent one single Situation that is not explicitly mentioned. That single Situation is the going of Fergus whilst carrying the sword. *Téit* ‘goes’ and *berid* ‘carries’ are both parts of this single Situation and therefore I have labeled them Imperfective.

4. *‘Araslig Cú Chulaind forsind áth 7 bátir tricha marcach día muintir isind usci.’*⁸²

‘Cú Chulainn slaughtered (I) him on the ford and thirty horsemen of his household were submerged (I) in the water.’⁸³

This example again displays a battle where multiple present tense actions take place. The events are not necessarily presented chronologically, but rather form the total of actions within the single Situation of the fight. I would therefore label these two verbs as Imperfective.

5. *‘Focherdar (I) a trí cóecta bunsach fair 7 arsisetar (I) isin sciath slissen uli les-seom.’*⁸⁴

‘They threw (I) their thrice fifty javelins at him, and they all stuck (I) in his toy shield.’⁸⁵

In this example, and the two following examples, we see the usage of the present tense to indicate simultaneous or overlapping actions. In this particular fight, Cú Chulainn is assailed by the boys of Ulster. It is contextually unlikely that the boys threw (*focherdat* ‘throw’) their javelins at him in one single throw, which he subsequently managed to block (*arsisetar* ‘stuck’) with his shield in one single action. Far more probable is the possibility that both

⁸⁰ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 33 l. 161

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 155

⁸² Ibid, p. 37 ll. 1165-6

⁸³ Ibid, p. 157

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 14 ll. 423-4

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 136

present tense verbs present two events that occurred alongside each other. Thus, in the timeframe of the confrontation between Cú Chulainn and the boys of Ulster these two events occurred simultaneously (e.g. some boys threw their javelins and Cú Chulainn warded them off before the next batch of javelins was thrown, which were again warded off, until all thrice fifty javelins were thrown and their had all stuck in his toy shield).

6. *'Focherdat (I) dano a liathhróite uli fair-seom 7 nos gaib-seom (I) cech óenlíathróit ina ucht.'*⁸⁶

'Then they threw (I) all their balls at him and he caught (I) them, every single ball, against his breast.'⁸⁷

This example is similar to the previous example. In this case defining the exact context is aided by the word *óenlíathróit* 'single ball'. This word implies that the balls that were thrown were not all caught in one action, but that this action is a repeated one. This further supports the interpretation of these two actions as occurring alongside in one single temporal Situation, like in example six.

7. *'Focherdat (I) dano a trí cóectu lorg ána fair. Araclích-som (I) conach ráncatár (Neg) hé, 7 gabais (P) airbir díib fria aiss.'*⁸⁸

'Then they threw (I) their thrice fifty hurling-clubs at him. He warded (I) them off so that they did not touch (Neg) him, and he took (P) a load of them on his back.'⁸⁹

This example is like the previous two examples. These sentences are the last sentences describing the fight between Cú Chulainn and the boys of Ulster. The first two clauses are similar to the earlier examples with *focherdat* 'throw'. Again thrice fifty objects (i.e. hurling-clubs) are thrown at Cú Chulainn and he wards them off so that the clubs do not touch him. These two actions occur alongside each other in one single temporal Situation. The last verb mentioned in this example is labeled as Perfective, because it displays an action that very probably takes place only after the previous Situation has been finished. *Focherdat* and *araclích* very likely form one single Situation wherein the actions of the two verbs temporally overlap each other. It would be unlikely for *gabais* 'took' to be a part of this single Situation

⁸⁶ O'Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 14 ll. 424-5

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 136-7

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 14 ll. 425-7

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 137

as it seems to present a single, uninterrupted, complete event. This single event probably occurred after the Situation of the throwing and warding was complete.

8. *‘Conérget (I) Ulaid imbi. Conérgim-se (I) 7 Conchobar lais-seom.’*⁹⁰

‘The Ulstermen rose up (I) around him but I and Conchobar stood up (I) to defend him.’⁹¹

In this example we see a case of simultaneous events. Although the context is not completely clear, it is most probable that the verbs *conérget* ‘rise’ and *conérgim-se* ‘rise’ represent one single Situation where the Ulstermen and Fergus and Conchobar rise up at the same time.

9. *‘Fanópair-som (I) arapa 7 dobeir (I) a chend 7 a muicc laiss.’*⁹²

‘Nevertheless he attacked (I) and carried (I) off his head and his pig.’⁹³

In this example a single Situation is started by the present tense verb *fanópair-som* ‘attacks’. During this Situation another verb occurs. *Dobeir* ‘carries’ very probably forms the concluding part of the Situation that was started by *fanópair-som*. These two verbs together therefore represent two parts of one single Situation and as such are labeled Imperfective.

10. *‘Atnagait (I) co céin móir oc imtrascrad forsind usci, 7 bátir (I) Fráech’*⁹⁴

‘For a long time they kept wrestling (I) in the water, and Fráech was submerged (I).’⁹⁵

This example contains one of the few instances where a temporal length is attributed to a verb by a lexical construction (i.e. *co céin móiri* ‘for a long time’). This helps when trying to determine the contextual features of these two clauses. It is probable that the wrestling (*atnagait* ‘wrestle’) occurred as a continuous event during which Fráech was submerged (*bátir* ‘is submerged’). We could then interpret *atnagait* as the verbal start of the single Situation that describes the entire wrestling match. *Bátir* and the verbal forms in the following sentences are part of the Situation started by *atnagait*. In that case these verbs are imperfective.

⁹⁰ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 15 ll. 476-7

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 138

⁹² Ibid, p. 16 ll. 518-9

⁹³ Ibid, p. 139

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 26 ll. 848-9

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 148

11. *‘Ecmaic (I) boí (S) a chlaideb hi farad Fergusa. Tánísca (I) Cuillius asa thrúail 7 fófácaib (I) in trúail fás.’⁹⁶*

‘Fergus’s sword happened (I) to be (S) beside him and Cuillius drew (P) it out of its scabbard, leaving (P) the scabbard empty.’⁹⁷

This example incorporates several verbal forms. All the verbal forms, except for *boí* ‘was’ which is a preterite form of the substantive, are historical presents. *Ecmaic* ‘happens’ is a verb that we would always expect to be in the present tense if we would accept my hypothesis. Contextually, ‘happens’ is always part of the Situation represented by another verb, which makes its event always incomplete, and as such imperfective (as it represents a part of one single Situation). If we look at all the references of *ad-cumaing* (the deuterotonic form of *ecmaic*) in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* with the meaning ‘happens’ we find a total of seven forms.⁹⁸ All of these forms are in the present tense, as we would expect. *Boí* will be discussed in chapter ten when I shall be looking at the usage of the substantive verb. The second sentence will be discussed in the last section of the chapter, as *tánísca* ‘draws’ and *fófácaib* ‘leaves’ would seem to be perfective.

12. *‘Téit (I) Nad Crantail arna b́arach asin dúnud 7 berid (I) noí mbera culind fúachtai follscaidi laiss.’⁹⁹*

‘On the morrow Nad Crantail went (I) forth from the camp, taking (I) with him nine stakes of holly, sharpened and charred.’¹⁰⁰

In this example another simultaneous event is presented by the two verbs (*téit* ‘goes’ and *berid* ‘carries’). Nad Crantail travels and during this movement he carries with him nine stakes. The context of this example is quite clear. Therefore both verbs are Imperfective.

13. *‘Nos gabar 7 fochertar láma tairis.’¹⁰¹*

‘[H]e was captured and seized.’¹⁰²

⁹⁶ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 33 ll. 144-5

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 154

⁹⁸ P. 33 l. 104; p. 33 l. 1061; p. 37 l. 1191; p. 38 l. 1221; p. 49 l. 1599; p. 50 l. 1617; p. 51 l. 1660

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 44 ll. 1415-6

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 164

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 51 l. 1680

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. 172

This example shows two overlapping events. *Nos gabar* ‘he is taken, held’ most probably still takes place when *fochertar* ‘is seized’ occurs. The two actions represent two internal parts of one Situation. It would be logical for the two verbal actions to occur simultaneously, as it is illogical to imagine a Situation where the seizing is done only after the target was captured.

14. ‘*Canaid (I) a chéle ferdord dó, contuli (I) friss co n-accae (?) nách crecht and ropo (Cop) glan.*’¹⁰³

‘Then he chanted (I) a low melody to him which lulled (I) him to sleep until Lug saw (?) that every wound he bore was (Cop) quite healed.’¹⁰⁴

In this example *canaid* ‘sings’ represents a continued activity that continues while the action of the next verb (*contuli* ‘sleeps’) occurs. The Situation started by *canaid* continues until *co*. I shall discuss this ending of Situations by *co* in paragraph 6.2.2. *Canaid* is therefore Imperfective. *Contuli* is also imperfective, as it occurs simultaneously to a part of the temporal span of *canaid*. *Co n-accae* will be discussed in the section regarding sentences with a historical present followed by *co*.

15. ‘*Fosnóbair-side (I) íarom tresin dúnad 7 gontai-seom (I) sochaidi, 7 gontar-som (I) co mór co lluid (P) cona inathar ima chosa dochum Con Chulaind triasin cath.*’¹⁰⁵

‘Then Cethern attacked (I) them throughout the encampment and killed (I) many. And he himself was grievously wounded (I) and came (P) from the fighting to Cú Chulainn, with his entrails lying about his feet.’¹⁰⁶

In this example I shall only discuss the first three verbs because the rest of the sentence will be discussed in the following section. The first verb (*fosnóbair-side* ‘makes for, attacks’) represents a continuous activity during which the following two verbs (*gontai* ‘kills, wounds’ and *gontar-som* ‘is wounded, killed’) occur. Therefore all three verbs are Imperfective, as none of them represents a complete single temporal Situation.

¹⁰³ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 65 ll. 2114-5

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 183

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 96 ll. 3172-4

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 209

16. ‘*Anaid (I) Findabair la Coin Culaind 7 tíagaid (I) Con[n]achta dia tír 7 tíagaid (I) Ulaid do Emain Macha cona mórc[h]oscar.*’¹⁰⁷

‘Finnabair remained (I) with Cú Chulainn and the men of Connacht returned (I) to their own land, while the Ulstermen went (I) in triumph to Emain Macha.’¹⁰⁸

In this example three events occur. Finnabair remains (*Anaid*), the men of Connacht go (*tíagaid*) home and the Ulstermen go (*Tíagaid*) to Emain Macha. Judging by the context (i.e. the end of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*) I think these three events happen simultaneously and therefore are all internal parts of one temporal Situation.

17. If we turn to the sentence used as an example of contextually ambiguous sentences above we can see a good example of the difference between preterite and present tense forms. The ambiguous sentence given above is repeated below.

‘*Dobeir (?) a fodb di sudiu 7 dobeir (?) na trí cind laiss inna charput, 7 asbert (?)*.’¹⁰⁹

‘He carried (?) off [their] spoils and brought (?) the three heads with him in his chariot and said (?)’¹¹⁰

Let us focus on the first two verbs (*dobeir* and *dobeir*). They are both present tense verbal forms. At first glance this sentence would seem to be ambiguous as to whether the two actions are part of one Situation or that they follow each other chronologically. Following the hypothesis given above, these present tense forms would indicate an imperfective aspect. This would mean that the two actions occur as two internal parts of one Situation or as temporally overlapping events. There is an example of similar context using preterite verbs. This occurs in the sentence preceding the example above.

‘*Dobert (P) Cú iarom a chend 7 a fodb laiss dia araid fadessin*’¹¹¹

‘He carried (P) off his head and his spoils to his own charioteer.’¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 124 ll. 4157-9

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23 ll. 756-7

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23 ll. 753-4

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 146

In this example we see the same action, but this time it is expressed by a single preterite verbal form. This means that the Situation (i.e. the carrying of the head and the spoils) is one Situation that, in this case, is represented by one verb. When we compare this sentence with the former example it becomes apparent that the two *dobeir* above are meant to represent a simultaneous action, parts of one Situation. This concurs with the hypothesis regarding the usage of the historical present. Thus we can change the ‘?’-labels in this example into Imperfective.

These seventeen examples were the most contextually clear of all relevant clauses in the Táin. If the hypothesis stated above would be accepted, then all sentences with a sequence of historical presents in them can now be correctly interpreted. I shall show examples of this in the final section of this chapter.

I have also tried to find a sentence with a sequence of historical presents that represent chronologically separate Situations, but I have not been able to find one. I shall come back later to the exceptions of the imperfectivity of historical presents.

§6.2.2 Historical present followed by *co*

In several of the examples given above I have mentioned that I would discuss sentences with *co* later on. In this section I shall delve deeper into the matter. I shall begin by shortly explaining what *co* is and what kind of impact it has on context.

Co is a conjunction which can mean ‘so that, and, until’. These translations are quite diverse, which makes the appropriate translation of *co* a tricky business. In my database, I have made a difference between *co* with the meaning ‘until’ and *co* ‘so that, and’. *Co* ‘until’ can be seen as an interruption of a given Situation (e.g. he walked **until** he saw a bird). In this case, the Situation represented by the first verb is not complete before the next Situation occurs and is therefore Imperfective. *Co* ‘so that, and’ indicates that the preceding verbal form is Perfective, as the complete action of that verb either results in another action or is subsequently followed by another action.

We would expect to find historical presents preceding *co* ‘until’ and preterite verbal forms preceding *co* ‘so that, and’. When we look at the database we see the following:

type of <i>co</i>	total verbal forms	historical presents preceding <i>co</i>	preterite verbal forms preceding <i>co</i>
<i>co</i> ‘until’	114	92.1 % (105)	7.9 % (9) ¹¹³
<i>co</i> ‘so that, and’	33	0 % (0)	100 % (33)
<i>co</i> translation ambiguous (?)	29	27.6 % (8)	72.4 % (21)

The table shows that both historical presents and preterite verbal forms fit the rule formulated above. 92.1 % of all verbal forms preceding *co* with the meaning ‘until’ are historical presents, indicating an Imperfective aspect. The nine preterite verbal forms, which precede *co* ‘until’, will be discussed in chapter 7. In the case of *co* with the meaning ‘so that, and’ we even see a 100 % preterite verbal forms.

The verb following *co* is often a preterite or perfect verbal form in the Táin. Only five examples of a present tense verb following *co* are present in the text.¹¹⁴ I shall discuss those sentences at the end of this section. In this section I shall give the clearest examples of these types of sentences where a present tense verb is used before *co*. In most cases it will be a present tense verb followed by *co* followed by a preterite verbal form.¹¹⁵ I shall discuss why the preterite is used in these locations when I discuss preterite verbal forms in the next chapter.

The sentences containing a historical present followed by *co* and then a preterite verbal form are by far the most common sentences including a historical present in the Táin. I shall therefore have to limit myself to some examples instead of listing all occurrences here. It is important to note that because of the different translations of *co* I have had to be very careful how to interpret the context. I have only taken the most probable occurrences of *co* as ‘until’.

There are two main categories of sentences which are repeated throughout the Táin containing exactly the order of historical present + *co* + preterite verbal form:

¹¹³ I will discuss all nine examples of preterite verbal forms preceding *co* ‘until’ in §7.3

¹¹⁴ p. 96 l. 3185; p. 117 l. 3871; p. 15 l. 464; p. 16 l. 498; p. 31 l. 993; p. 65 l. 2114

¹¹⁵ I shall discuss the cases where a historical present follows after *co* in §6.2.2.4

§6.2.2.1 *co*-sentences with verbs of motion

The first category of often repeated sentences with a historical present and *co* are the sentences representing movement and arrival. In the Táin Bó Cúailnge journeys are often represented as a version of the following example:

*‘Tíagait (I) co mbátar (S) oc Ath Táiten.’*¹¹⁶

‘They go (I) until they were (S) at Áth Taiten.’¹¹⁷

In this example the first verb, *tíagait* ‘go’, expresses a type of movement. The action of this movement lasts until *co*. *Co mbátar* ‘until they were’ closes the Situation described by *tíagait*. Therefore *tíagait* is Imperfective, as it does not represent a complete Situation. This sentence is exemplary for the type of sentence earlier described. This category of sentences is abundantly found in the Táin. To illustrate this I have given two more examples of this type of sentence below.

*‘Tecait trá co mbátar i nIraird Chuillend.’*¹¹⁸

‘They went on then [until they were]¹¹⁹ in Irard Cuilenn[.]’¹²⁰

*‘Tíagait iarom co mbátar hi Crónig.’*¹²¹

‘So they went then [until they were] in Crónech.’¹²²

There is one example of this type of sentence with a preterite verbal form preceding a *co* with the clear meaning ‘until’. This verbal form will be discussed in example six of §7.3.

§6.2.2.2 *co*-sentences with verbs of striking/throwing

The second category is often found in the context of a fight or battle. In these sentences a verb of striking or throwing (e.g. *fo-ceird*, *benaid*, *gonaid*, etc.) is followed by *co* and subsequently by a preterite verbal form expressing breaking, falling or dying (e.g. *maidid*, *marbaid*, *brissid*,

¹¹⁶ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, Ibid, p. 27 l. 859

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 149

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 9 l. 256

¹¹⁹ Translations in [...] are my own translations which are used when O’Rahilly (1983) does not reflect the verbal forms or periods in her translation.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 133

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 47 l. 1557

¹²² Ibid, p. 168

etc.). It is of great interest to see that these verbs of striking and throwing appear to behave differently from what we would expect when scrutinizing their English translation. It seems that verbs like *fo-ceird* ‘throws’ contain an implicit goal. This means that the act of casting/throwing is only complete when a hit is made. This means that the projectile that was thrown has to reach its destination before the Situation represented by *fo-ceird* is complete. I shall now give an example of such a sentence:

‘Tolléci Cú cloich dó co mmebaid a c[h]end de.’¹²³

‘He cast a stone to him until he struck his head off.’¹²⁴

In this example the action of the first verb, *tolléci* ‘lets loose’, only comes to a close when the next verb is introduced by *co*. *Tolléci* represents a Situation which is interrupted by *co*. This category of sentence also occurs with a preterite verbal form.¹²⁵ The rest of the sentences uses the historical present. This points to the translation of *co* as ‘until’.

§6.2.2.3 Other *co*-sentences

Apart from the two categories presented above there are also sentences that contain a present tense verbal form followed by *co* and a preterite verb that are less common. I shall present the contextually clearest sentences below.

1. *‘Gabaid (I) íarom eter a dí láim 7 cotmeil (I) 7 fochrotha (I) con sephaind (P) a channebor ass combo (Cop) búadartha in t-áth día chacc 7 combo (Cop) thrúallnethe aér na cethararda dia dendgur.’¹²⁶*

‘Then he seized (I) him with both hands and squeezed (I) him and shook (I) him until he drove (P) his excrement out of him and the water of the ford was (Cop) turbid with his dung and the air of the firmament was (Cop) polluted with his stench.’¹²⁷

The seizing (*gabaid* ‘seizes, holds, grabs’), squeezing (*cotmeil* ‘squeezes’) and shaking (*fochrotha* ‘shakes’) represent three closely connected events. I would argue that although

¹²³ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 291. 934

¹²⁴ Own translation; O’Rahilly has: ‘Then Cú Chulainn cast a stone at him and smashed his head’ p. 151; this translation does not follow the Irish very strictly.

¹²⁵ I shall discuss the eight examples of a preterite verbal form with the meaning ‘to throw’ followed by *co* in §7.3

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 56 ll. 1838-41

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 176

gabaid sets in before the other two events occur, it still continues when *cotmeil* and *fochrotha* take place. *Cotmeil* and *fochrotha* probably occur truly simultaneously. These three verbal forms are thus parts of one single Situation. From the context it becomes apparent that *con* should most probably be translated as ‘until’. This interpretation would suggest that the Situation presented by *gabaid*, *cotmeil* and *fochrotha* is an ongoing event that lasts up to the point where the excrement is driven out of the poor victim. If that is the case, then the Situation presented by these three verbs is incomplete, as the culminatory phase is covered by another verb. *Sephaind*, on the other hand, is perfective. It represents a complete Situation.

2. ‘*Canaid (I) a chéle ferdord dó, contuli (I) friss co n-accae (P) nách crecht and ropo (Cop) glan.*’¹²⁸

‘Then he chanted (I) a low melody to him which lulled (I) him to sleep until Lug saw (P) that every wound he bore was (Cop) quite healed.’¹²⁹

This example has also already been discussed¹³⁰. I shall focus on *co n-accae* ‘until he saw/sees’ here. Like in example one, a Situation is presented which endures through time (i.e. the chanting of the low melody). This Situation is then interrupted by *co n-accae*, a form of *ad-cí*. Therefore these two verbs have been labeled Imperfective. *Co n-accae* most probably represents a complete Situation, as the following section of the text is a song that Lug sang after he saw that the healing was complete.

3. ‘*Conérig-som (I) fón imdai dano co corastar (P) de in n-imdai cosin tríchait lath ngaile ro boí (Subst.) indi co mboí (Subst.) for lár in tigi.*’¹³¹

‘The boy rose (I) to his feet under the couch and on to the floor of the house he threw (P) from him the couch together with the thirty warriors who were (Subst.) in it.’¹³²

In this example the Situation of the first verb, *conérig-som* ‘arises’, is not completed before another Situation (i.e. *co corastar* ‘were thrown’) occurs. I have labeled *conérig-som* as Imperfective as the rising motion of Cú Chulainn (the boy mentioned) did not reach its culminatory phase until he threw the couch away from him. The first verb would in this

¹²⁸ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 65 ll. 2114-5

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 183

¹³⁰ See p. 37

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 15 ll. 477-8

¹³² Ibid, p. 138

interpretation be imperfective and the second perfective. This fits with the tense of the verbal forms found. *Conérig* is a present tense verbal form and *corastar* is a preterite verbal form.

5. ‘Áit i n-accai (I) in búachail .i. Lóthor, tofóhair (I) cucai co mbert (P) a inathar ass for a bennaib 7 tofóhair (I) cona t[h]rí cóectaib samaisce a ndúnad co n-appad (P) cóeca láech laiss.’¹³³

‘When the bull caught sight (I) of Lóthar the cowherd, he rushed (I) at him [until he] disemboweled (P) him with his horns. Then together with his thrice fifty heifers the bull made for (I) the encampment [until] fifty warriors were killed (P) by him.’¹³⁴

In this example there are two instances of a historical present followed by *co* and a preterite verbal form. The sentence starts with *accai* ‘sees’, which is the present tense verbal form of *ad-cí*. We saw the preterite form of this verb in example three. There is a close connection between *accai* and the first *tofóhair*. The cause for this close connection is *áit i n-* ‘while’, which precedes *accai*. This implies that the action represented by *accai* occurs simultaneously alongside *tofóhair* and is therefore Imperfective. O’Rahilly (1986) reflects this in her translation (“caught sight” instead of “saw”). It is of interest to note that the same historical present (*tofóhair* ‘makes for, attacks’) is used in both clauses. This emphasizes the close relation between *tofóhair* and *co mbert* ‘until he carried, took’ and between *tofóhair* and *co n-appad* ‘died’. I would argue that the Situation described by both *tofóhair* is a continuous action that does not reach its culminatory phase. It is important to note that this other verb is not part of the same Situation.

§6.2.2.4 Historical presents following *co* ‘until’

There are three examples of *co* ‘until’ followed by a historical present. All these verbal forms are forms of the verb *ad-cí*. These forms are *co-n-accai*¹³⁵, *co-n-accai*¹³⁶ and *co-n-aidchi*¹³⁷. It could be that these three verbal forms are fossilized forms of the verb *ad-cí*, and can therefore be used next to the preterite form *co-n-accae*. This would point to a Middle Irish origin of these three verbal forms, as the final vowels of verbal forms become interchangeable after the Old Irish period.

¹³³ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 31 ll. 990-3

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 153

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 16 l. 516

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 38 l. 1221

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 100 l. 3322

§6.2.3 Historical present surrounded by preterite

So far I have discussed different kinds of sentences with historical presents in them. I shall now discuss the hardest category: single, lone historical presents. These sentences are often very hard to interpret without much doubt and uncertainty. I have endeavored to find the clearest contextual examples of the sentences that contain a single historical present followed by sentences that only contain preterite verbs. This has proven difficult, however, as the majority of these cases carry the label ‘?’, because of their contextual uncertainty.

1. *‘In tan dolluid (?) Fergus don phupull, **gabaid** (I) Ailill gáris fris. Asbert (?) Fergus[.]’¹³⁸*

‘When he came (?) into the tent Ailill **began to laugh** (I) at him. Fergus said (?).’¹³⁹

This example can be interpreted in different ways. I think the most likely context is that Ailill is still laughing when Fergus speaks. This would mean that *gabaid* is imperfective.

2. *‘**Sríd** (I) Nad Crantail biur for Coin Culaind. **Clísis** (I) Cú Chulaind for rind in bera hísín 7 ní nderbai (P) di forimim inna n-én.’¹⁴⁰*

‘Nad Crantail **cast** (I) a stake at Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn **sprang** (I) on to the top of that stake but it did not hinder (P) him in his fowling.’

In this example the only historical present is *sríd* ‘throws, sets in motion’. In this context it is very likely that the throwing of the projectile is not yet complete when Cú Chulainn jumps on top of it. This would mean that the Situation represented by *sríd* is imperfective. The question arises why *clísis* is not a present tense verbal form, as the action of the verb seems to take place during the Situation started by *sríd*. I shall return to *clísis* when I discuss the preterite verbal forms.

3. *‘Condrecat (I) iarom.’¹⁴¹*

‘Then they met (I).’¹⁴²

¹³⁸ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 33 ll. 1066-7

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 155

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44 ll. 1417-9

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75 l. 2469

This example is a sentence which stands between two sections of direct speech. In the section of direct speech preceding this sentence a wish is uttered to convene a meeting. In the section of direct speech following this sentence a dialogue is held between the two parties involved. It seems likely that *condreecat* ‘gather, meet’ is ongoing while the direct speech is held. If we would take this direct speech as being a part of the Situation represented by *condreecat*, the verb itself would not represent the complete Situation. It is therefore probably imperfective.

§6.3 Problematic verbs

In this section I shall discuss those verbs that seem to be examples of perfectivity instead of imperfectivity. This would not be consistent with my hypothesis, as, according to the hypothesis, the historical present is used to indicate imperfectivity. I will therefore scrutinize those historical presents that seem to represent a perfective aspect. Of the 599 historical presents, only 10 (1.7 %) seem to indicate a clear perfective aspect. 412 (68.8 %) verbal forms are labeled Imperfective and 177 (30.5 %) verbal forms are labeled ‘?’. I shall discuss the ten problematic clauses below and I shall present the arguments indicating that the most probable context is perfective. I shall also try to show how the hypothesis posed above could possibly be applied, making the verbal form imperfective. It should be noted that these ten historical presents form only a small part of the total of sentences. I do not wish to make little of these examples but in no way should they be seen as giant obstacles for the hypothesis posed above.

1. *‘Dotháegat (P) iar sudiu I mMag Trego 7 scurit (?) and 7 arfognat (?) dóib.’*¹⁴³

‘They **came** (P) on then to Mag Trego and they encamped (?) and prepared food (?) for themselves.’¹⁴⁴

In this example three present tense verbs are used. *Dotháegat* ‘go’ has been labeled (P). The action of *dotháegat* has to be complete before a camp can be established. Therefore it seems logical that the verb represents a single complete Situation. It might however be that we could envision a close connection between *dotháegat* and the next two verbs. It would be feasible then to translate “coming then to Mag Trego they encamped and prepared food for themselves”. If that is the case, then *dotháegat* is part of one Situation in which the next two verbs also form a part. The following two verbs, *scurit* ‘encamp’ and *arfognat* ‘prepare food’,

¹⁴² O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 192

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 6 ll. 187-8

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 130

could be an example of simultaneous parts of that single Situation. It is possible that the army raised their tents and prepared their food as part of an encampment. It is however equally possible that both actions took place as two separate chronologically ordered events. Therefore I have labeled these verbs ‘?’.

2. *‘Dosberat (P) i lláim Fergus meic Róich in n-id. Arléga-side (?) in n-ogum boí (S) isind id.’*¹⁴⁵

‘They **handed** (P) the withe to Fergus mac Róich; he read (?) out the ogam inscription that was (S) on it.’¹⁴⁶

In this example the present tense verb *dosberat* ‘carry, give’ seems to indicate a complete Situation. It is likely that Fergus mac Róich is only able to read out the ogam inscription after he has successfully been given the withe. Therefore I labeled this verbal form Perfective. I would like to pose a solution that would enable *dosberat* to represent a imperfective verb. Although the two actions are logically separate events it might be possible that the author wanted to create the impression of one single Situation. The handing of the withe and the reading out loud the inscription on it would then be seen as two closely connected events (i.e. ‘handing the withe to Fergus mac Róich he read out the ogam inscription that was on it’). This would mean that both *dosberat* and *arléga-side* are representing two parts of one single Situation.

3. & 4. *‘Ecmaic (I) boí (S) a chlaideb hi farad Fergus. Tánísca (I) Cuillius asa thrúaill 7 fófácaib (I) in trúaill fás.’*¹⁴⁷

‘Fergus’s sword happened (I) to be (S) beside him and Cuillius **drew** (P) it out of its scabbard, **leaving** (P) the scabbard empty.’¹⁴⁸

I have discussed this example above¹⁴⁹. The two verbs *tánísca* ‘draws’ and *fófácaib* ‘leaves’ would seem to represent consecutive events. The drawing of the sword has to precede the

¹⁴⁵ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 9 ll. 264-5

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 132

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 33 ll. 144-5

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 154

scabbard being left empty. However, it might be that the author wants to suggest that the actions are two parts of one single Situation. This would create a narrow connection similar to the one discussed in example 2.

5. *'Tic (P) Cú Chulaind isin carpat 7 focheird (I) airdmius forsin lorg iar céin móir.'*¹⁵⁰

‘Cú Chulainn **got** (P) out of the chariot and for a long time he estimated (I) the number of the host.’¹⁵¹

In this example we can observe a situation that is similar to the past two examples. The act of Cú Chulainn getting out of his chariot has to be complete before he can commence estimating the number of the host. Therefore *tic* ‘comes’ should be Perfective. It could however again be argued that the two actions form one single Situation as discussed in the previous examples. The translation would then be “getting out of his chariot, Cú Chulainn cast an estimate of the number of the host”.

6. *'La sodain fónérig (?) Cú Chulaind 7 benaid (P) a chend de cosind luirg áne 7 gabaid (I) immáin liathráite ríam dar in mag.'*¹⁵²

‘Whereupon Cú Chulainn rose (?) to his feet, and, **striking** (P) off his opponent’s head with his hurley, he began (I) to drive the head like a ball before him across the plain.’¹⁵³

This example is also similar to the previous examples. Although *benaid* ‘cuts’ has to be complete before *gabaid* occurs, it is probable that the two actions can be seen as one single Situation. O’Rahilly (1976) translated these two verbs as closely connected similar to what I have shown in the examples above.

7, 8, 9 & 10. *'Cladar (P) a fert íarom. Sátir (P) a lia. Scríbhthair (P) a ainm n-ogaim. Agair (P) a gubae.'*¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ See p. 36

¹⁵⁰ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 11 ll. 322-3

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p. 133

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 16 ll. 501-2

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 139

‘Then Etarcomol’s grave **was dug** (P) and his headstone **was planted** (P) in the ground; his name **was written** (P) in ogam and he **was mourned** (P).¹⁵⁵

These four verbs seem to represent a sequence of chronologically ordered complete events. This would mean that all four verbal forms are Perfective. It could however be argued that we have a case of multiple Perfective verbal forms forming one single Situation (i.e. the burial of Etarcomol), like in the previous examples. This is not entirely improbable.

I have now discussed the ten examples of most probably perfective verbal forms. I shall now see whether the hypothesis proposed above can be used to interpret the aspectual ambiguous verbal forms in the Táin.

§6.4 Question marks

The present tense seems to be used to indicate an imperfective aspect. I have tried to show this in the different kinds of situations where historical presents are used in the text. If we would accept this hypothesis, then we could ‘fill in’ the contexts of the verbal forms marked as ‘?’. As these verbal forms would normally represent ambiguous contexts, this hypothesis shows how they can correctly be interpreted. I shall give several examples of sentences that become contextually clear through the implementation of this hypothesis. The usage of the present tense as imperfectivity marker shows synchronic temporal Situations. I shall also show examples of how the usage of the present tense can help when trying to establish the correct translation of a verb (e.g. *gabaid* ‘takes, seizes, holds’ would be far more likely to mean durative ‘hold’ than inchoative ‘seizes’ when it is used in the present tense). In each example I shall present the translation made by O’Rahilly (1976) followed by my own translation. This will illustrate the difference the hypothesis regarding the historical present can cause in a translation.

1. *‘Dogni (I) in t-ara ón aní sin. Glenait (I) ind eich isin mónai íarom. Taurlaing (?) Cú Chulaind 7 gabaid (?) in n-oss ba (Cop) nessom dó 7 bá (Cop) caímem díb. Slaittius (I) sethnón na móna 7 dammainti (I) fo chétóir. Cumrigis (P) eter dá fert in c[h]arpait.’¹⁵⁶*

¹⁵⁴ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 43 ll.1385-6

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 163

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 24 ll. 777-80

‘The charioteer did (I) so, and the horses stuck (I) fast in the bog. Cú Chulainn sprang (?) out of the chariot and caught (?) the deer that was (Cop) nearest to him and the finest of the herd. He lashed (I) the horses through the bog and subdued (I) the deer immediately and tied (P) it up between the two poles of the chariot.’¹⁵⁷

‘The charioteer did (I) so, and the horses stuck (I) fast in the bog during this. Cú Chulainn jumped (I) out of the chariot so that he seized (I) the deer that was (Cop) nearest to him and the finest of the herd. He lashed (I) the horses through the bog while he subdued (I) the deer in an instance. He then tied (P) it up between the two poles of the chariot.’¹⁵⁸

The last translation shows how in this example the sequence of events is clarified by the usage of the present tense. We see a string single Situations represented by multiple historical presents, creating a dynamic whole.

2. *‘Dogní (I) Lóeg aní sin 7asbeir (?) fri Coin Culaind[.]’*¹⁵⁹

‘Lóeg did (I) so and said (?) to Cú Chulainn[.]’¹⁶⁰

‘Lóeg did (I) so while he said (I) to Cú Chulainn.’¹⁶¹

In this example the sequence of events is clarified by the usage of the present tense. Following my hypothesis the Situations of both verbs overlap and are therefore both Imperfective.

3. *‘A ndochóid (?) i n-occus don dúnud tísca (?) a cend día muin 7 adfét (?) a imthechta do Meidb 7 Ailill.’*¹⁶²

‘When the charioteer drew (?) near the camp, he [held high] (?) the head from his back, and related (?) his adventures to Ailill and Medb.’¹⁶³

‘When the charioteer had arrived (P) near the camp¹⁶⁴, he held (I) the head from his back up high while he related (I) his adventures to Ailill and Medb.’¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁷ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 147

¹⁵⁸ Own translation

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 11 l. 318

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 133

¹⁶¹ Own translation

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 28 ll. 902-3

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 150

¹⁶⁴ I shall explain this translation of the perfect verbal form in chapter 9.

¹⁶⁵ Own translation

In this example the last two verbs are both historical presents. Following the hypothesis they should both be imperfective. When we use this aspect we arrive at a translation that creates a simultaneous event.

4. *'Benaid (?) gabail I sudiu óenbéim cona c[h]laidiub, 7 sáidsius (?) for medón na glassi cona díchtheth (Neg) carpat friae di síu nách anall. Dofuircet (?) oco Eirr 7 Inell, Foich 7 Fóchlam a ndá ara.'*¹⁶⁶

'There he cut (?) down a forked branch with one blow of his sword and fixed (?) it in the middle of the stream so that a chariot could not pass (Neg) it on this side or that. While he was thus engaged Eirr and Indell with their two charioteers, Fóich and Fochlam, came (?) up with him.'¹⁶⁷

In this example it has not been necessary for me to create my own translation as O'Rahilly (1976) actually already shows the imperfectivity of all historical presents in this sentence (*benaid* 'strikes', *sáidsius* 'fixes' and *dofuircet* 'come upon'). The first two verbs, *benaid* and *sáidsius* most probably represent two chronologically ordered events that could normally also be perfective. But simultaneous to these two Situations is the coming of Eirr, Indell and their charioteers (*dofuircet*). Because of these simultaneous Situations, all the verbs are in the present tense.

I hope to have shown how the hypothesis regarding the usage of the historical present can be of substantial aid when translating and interpreting the Táin. The next chapter will be about the preterite verbal forms. These two chapters are closely connected to each other, as the aspectual dichotomy of perfective and imperfective seems to be reflected in these two types of verbal forms. It is, therefore, only when both tenses are viewed that the picture becomes completely clear.

¹⁶⁶ O'Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 11 ll. 331-3

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 134

Chapter 7: The preterite verbal forms

I shall begin this chapter by stating the hypothesis that I formulated after having analyzed the usage of the preterite verbal forms in the Táin Bó Cúailnge. After having presented the hypothesis I shall present the different arguments I have found to support it, followed by a discussion of the arguments that would be posed against the hypothesis.

Hypothesis: the preterite is used to indicate a perfective aspect.

§7.1 The Database

My database has the following data on the usage of preterite verbal forms in the Táin.

Verbal form:	Total:	Imperfective:	‘?’	Perfective
Preterite	572	3.7 % (21)	29.7 % (170)	66.6 % (381)

It is of interest to see that the percentages of the usage of the historical present seem to mirror the percentages of the usage of the preterite. In my hypothesis the preterite is used to indicate that a verb represents a complete Situation, not interrupted by anything. I shall discuss several clear examples of this perfective aspect of the preterite verbal forms.

I shall not be able to discuss the preterite verbal forms in the same way as I did with the present tense in chapter 6. With the present tense I could show different categories of sentences that lend themselves well to imperfectivity. Perfectivity, on the other hand, is apparent in various types of sentences. An action can be complete in a fast-paced action sequence, in the middle of conversations, while journeying, etc.. I shall show some sentences that are examples of the perfectivity of the preterite verbal forms. Next I shall discuss the 21 preterite verbs that have the appearance of being imperfective. I shall end this chapter by discussing one verb that seems to switch randomly between present and preterite, *as-beir* ‘says’.

§7.2 Usage of Perfective preterite verbal forms

I shall now present several general examples of sentences where the preterite is used to indicate a perfective aspect. These examples will be representative of different kinds of sentences which follow the type of sentence of the example.

§7.2.1 Preterite verbal forms used after *co*

The preterite is used consistently after both *co* ‘until’ and *co* ‘so that’. I have shown several examples of this above when I discussed this category of sentences and the usage of the historical present. I shall now repeat one of these examples to explain the role of the preterite in the sentences:

‘Tolléici (I) Cú cloich dó co mmebaid (P) a c[h]end de.’¹⁶⁸

‘He let loose (I) a stone to him until he struck (P) his head off.’¹⁶⁹

In this sentence *mmebaid* ‘struck’ is a preterite verbal form. It is the formula of sentences such as this one to have an imperfective first verb. This first verb expresses an action that lasts up to *co*. After *co* we see the resolution of the Situation. The first verb is not finished but abruptly stops, the second verb is described as a complete Situation. There is nothing imperfective about *mmebaid* in this example. The striking off of the head is not interrupted by any means or stopped before it reaches its culminatory phase. This is a re-occurring feature in all the sentences that follow this pattern (historical present + *co* + preterite and preterite + *co* + preterite).

§7.2.2 Preterite verbal forms used at the start or end of paragraphs/chapters

Preterite verbal forms are very often used at the end of paragraphs or chapters. This would be explained by the hypothesis that they represent perfective aspect, as stories always tend to end with a finishing statement (e.g. and they all went home afterwards). As nothing happens after the last verb mentioned, the Situation represented by the verbal form is in the rule complete. The only reason the last verb of a section or paragraph could be imperfective (and thus represented by a historical present) is when the Situation of the verb is simultaneous to a previously mentioned Situation¹⁷⁰. This however does not occur often.

¹⁶⁸ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 291. 934

¹⁶⁹ Own translation; O’Rahilly has: ‘Then Cú Chulainn cast a stone at him and smashed his head’ p. 151; this translation does not follow the Irish very strictly.

¹⁷⁰ See example 17 on page 38

I shall now give some examples of sentences containing a preterite verbal form at the end of a paragraph of section:

‘Ocus a mac Conall Cernach anais (P) lais oco thimthirect di c[h]lochaib 7 gaib.’¹⁷¹

‘And his son Conall Cernach remained (P) by him, furnishing him with stones and darts.’¹⁷²

This example is the last sentence of the short paragraph titled *Aislinge nAimirgin annso*. The action of the preterite verbal form *anais* ‘waited, remained’ is the last action described in the text. Therefore we can reasonably state that *anais* represents a single Situation which is complete. For this reason I have labeled the verb Perfective.

‘Dollotár (P) iarom a triur co hEmain Macha.’¹⁷³

‘The three of them went (P) on to Emain Macha.’¹⁷⁴

This example is the last sentence of *Cath Eógain meic Derthacht fri Conchobar inso*. The Situation described by the verb is perfective, as it represents a complete Situation.

§7.2.3 Other Perfective preterite verbal forms

Apart from the two previous types of sentences, perfective verbs occur in almost any context, throughout the entire text. As I cannot display all those occurrences of preterite verbal forms representing a perfective aspect, I shall now give several examples gathered throughout the text to show how perfectivity can be defined by looking at the contextual data.

‘Gatais (P) Dócha a chend de-som iarom d’adaich 7 bertai (P) dia húa.’¹⁷⁵

‘Then in the evening Cócha struck (P) off Iliach’s head and carried (P) it to his grandson.’¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 103 ll.3408-9

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 216

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 17 ll. 522-3

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102 ll. 3384-5

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 215

This example shows most likely a chronological sequence of events. First the head of Iliach is struck off and after this has taken place the head is carried to the grandson. Therefore I have labeled both verbs Perfective, as they both represent a temporally complete Situation.

*‘Dobert (P) Cú iarom a chend 7 a fodb laiss dia araid fadessin’*¹⁷⁷

‘He carried (P) off his head and his spoils to his own charioteer.’¹⁷⁸

I have discussed this example above¹⁷⁹. *Dobert* shows one complete Situation. The carrying of the head and the spoils is not interrupted or simultaneous to another event. The verb is the last verb in this section of text and is thus complete. Therefore I have labeled this verb Perfective.

*‘Focherdat (I) dano a trí cóectu lorg ána fair. Araclích-som (I) conach ráncatár (Neg) hé, 7 gabais (P) airbir díib fria aiss.’*¹⁸⁰

‘Then they threw (I) their thrice fifty hurling-clubs at him. He warded (I) them off so that they did not touch (Neg) him, and he **took** (P) a load of them on his back.’¹⁸¹

I discussed this example in the chapter on the historical present.¹⁸² *Gabais* seems to represent a single complete Situation and is therefore labeled Perfective. Again, this verb is the last verb in this section of text and is thus most probably complete.

§7.3 Problematic verbs

I have shown how preterite verbal forms can represent clear perfective Situations. I shall now move on to the 21 instances where a preterite verbal form is used in a possible imperfective setting.

1. & 2. *‘A nad-ránic (?) in t-ócláech airm i mboí (S) Cú Chulaind, argládais (I) 7 airchísis (I) de.’*¹⁸³

‘When the warrior reached (?) the spot where Cú Chulainn was (S) he **spoke** (I) to him and **commiserated** (I) with him.’¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁷ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 23 ll. 753-4

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146

¹⁷⁹ See p. 38

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14 ll. 425-7

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137

¹⁸² See p. 34

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 64 ll. 2103-4

This example shows two preterite verbal forms that seem to represent two simultaneous events. It is unlikely that the speaking and commiserating happened in a chronological divided order. Following the hypothesis, these verbs should be historical presents. A reason why the preterite is used here might be found in the verbal forms themselves. *Airchissis* ‘commiserated’ is a Middle Irish form of the verb *ar-ceissi*, which became the simple verb *airchisid*. If *airchissis* is in fact a Middle Irish form, then I need not take it into account since the focus of my thesis is on Old Irish. *Argládais* is also a Middle Irish form. It is derived from the deponent verb *ad-gladathar*. We would expect to find Old Irish *atgládistar*, but deponent verbs tend to decline in Middle Irish leading to the active inflection of *argládais*.

3., 4. & 5. ‘**Crothis** (I) a scíath 7 **creaigis** (I) a slega 7 **bertnaigis** (I) a chlaidem[.]’¹⁸⁵

‘He **shook** (I) his shield and **brandished** (I) his spears and **waved** (I) his sword [.]’¹⁸⁶

This example was found on the same page as the example above. Again we see multiple actions that likely occurred simultaneously. It is unlikely for the shaking, brandishing and waving to have taken place as distinct Situations. Why then is the preterite used? Despite the lack of a contextual explanation, there might be something else at work here. It could very well be that these verbs are also Middle Irish, like *argládais* in the example above. The close proximity and the abundance of s-preterites hints strongly towards this. All these verbs were deponent verbal forms in Old Irish but have received active inflection here, indicating a Middle Irish trend. DIL states that *creaigid* might be derived from *creas*, which itself is a late formation from the passive preterite verbal form of *fo-ceird*. This leads to the conclusion that all five forms are demonstrably Middle Irish and therefore do not influence my research.

6. ‘**Luid** (I) in tarb íarom 7 cóeca samasca imbi co mboí (S) hi Sléib Chulind, 7 luid (?) a búachaill ina díaid, Forgemem a ainm.’¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 183

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 64 ll. 2081-2

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 182

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 30 ll. 963-4

‘Then the bull went (I) with fifty heifers [until it was (S)] in Slíab Cuillinn, and his herdsman, Forgaimen, followed (?) him.’¹⁸⁸

This example shows the construction discussed in the previous chapter. A verb of movement is combined with *co* ‘until, so that’ and follow by the substantive verb. We would normally expect the first verb of this construction to be a historical present, as discussed above. I cannot think of a reason why in this case a preterite verbal form was used.

7. **‘Imbert-side (I) na lámlecca foraib 7 a luirg áne foraib. Marbaid (I) nónbór díib 7 fácbait (I) cóeca cned fair-seom 7 documlat (?) ass iarom olchena.’**¹⁸⁹

‘He **cast (I)** handstones at them and **belaboured (I)** them with his hurley. He killed (I) nine of them but they dealt (I) him fifty wounds, and then they went (?) off.’¹⁹⁰

In this example *imbert-side* ‘wielded’ seems to be incomplete when the next verbal forms (*marbaid*, *fácbait* and *documlat*) occur. It is therefore Imperfective. I am unable to suggest a reason for it being a preterite verbal form.

8. **‘Docorastár (I) Dócha gaí for Fíachaig co lluid (P) i nDubthach.’**¹⁹¹

‘Dócha **cast (I)** a spear at Fíacha and it went (P) into Dubthach.’¹⁹²

The formula present in examples 6 and 7 is also apparent here. This example (and the following four examples) consists of a verb of throwing, followed by *co* and then by a preterite (perfective) verbal form. This first verb should be imperfective, but in this case a preterite verbal form is found, not the historical present we would expect to find. It could be that *co* does not mean ‘until’ here but ‘so that’. The argument against this suggestion would be that there are several sentences with a verb of casting followed by *co* ‘until’, as we have seen in the previous chapter.

¹⁸⁸ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 152

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17 ll. 534-6

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75 ll. 2459-60

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 192

9. *'Srethis (I) liic telma boí ina láim fair con sescaind (P) ina c[h]end co tuc (P) a inc[h]ind ass.'*¹⁹³

'He **threw** (I) at him a sling-stone which he had in his hand and it went (P) into the jester's head and drove (P) his brains out.'¹⁹⁴

See example 8. In the case the preterite form is of the verbal form of *sreid* 'throw'. The preterite form *srethis/sredis* could very well be a Middle Irish form, based on the simplified verb *sredid*. This would then indicate that this example is similar to examples 1-5.

10. *'Srédís (I) Cú Chulaind cloich fair oc ÁthTamuin co mmebaid (P) a c[h]end de.'*¹⁹⁵

'Cú Chulainn cast (I) a stone at him at the place called Áth Tamuin and smashed (P) his head.'¹⁹⁶

See example 9.

11. *'Sréthís (I) fair íarom in sleg co mmebaid (P) a druim trít.'*¹⁹⁷

'Then Cú Chulainn cast (I) the spear at Fóill so that his back broke (P) therefrom'¹⁹⁸

See example 9.

12. *'Sréthius (I) fair íarom in sleig conid rallá (P) ina chomsudiu.'*¹⁹⁹

'Then he cast (I) the spear at him and knocked (P) him down.'²⁰⁰

¹⁹³ O'Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 49 ll. 1600-1

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 169

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76 ll. 2486-7

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 193

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23 l. 739

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23 l. 752

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146

See example 9.

13. *'Sraíthius (I) di chloich a Cuinchiu conda ort (P) ina réid.'*²⁰¹

'He threw (I) a stone at her from Cuinche and killed (P) her on her plain.'²⁰²

See example 9.

14. *'Sraithe (I) din chertgaí co lluid (P) i nderc a oxaille co mmebaid (P) i ndé ind óe altarrach resin gaí.'*²⁰³

'He **cast** (I) a small spear at him and it went (P) into his armpit, and his liver on the other side broke (P) in two at the impact of the spear.'²⁰⁴

See example 9.

15. *'Sraíthi (I) in n-ubullchless tarraid ina láim co lluid (P) iter chobrad 7 bróin in scéith co lluid (P) tríana chend ind athig síar.'*²⁰⁵

'[He] **cast** (I) the ball-feat which he held in his hand so that it went (P) between the boss and the centre of the shield and [it went (P)] back through the fellow's head.'²⁰⁶

See example 9.

16 & 17. *'Docer (I) la Mend íarom dá fer déac díib-som 7 dá fer déc dia muintir-som didiu, 7 goíta-som (I) fesin calad 7 ba (Cop.) forrderg a muintir.'*²⁰⁷

²⁰¹ O'Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 31 l. 976

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 152

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 46 ll. 1504-5

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 167

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53 ll. 1725-6

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 101 ll. 3338-40

‘Twelve of them **fell** (I) at Mend’s hand and twelve of his own people **fell** (I) too. Mend himself **was grievously wounded** (I) while his men were (Cop.) red with blood.’²⁰⁸

In this example *docer* ‘fell’ and *goíta-som* ‘was wounded’ seem to represent simultaneous events. A single Situation (the battle) is represented by these two verbal forms. This means that they are Imperfective. I do not know why preterite verbal forms have been used in this sentence. It could be that the events did occur subsequently, but that does not correspond to the most probable logic of the situation.

18, 19, 20 & 21. ‘*Faráith* (I) *Medb ón íarom. Faráith* (I) *in trícha cé na nGailian. Faráith* (I) *Ailill. Faráith* (I) *Fergus.*’²⁰⁹

‘Medb **rushed** (I) to the rescue. So **did** (I) the division of the Leinster-men. So too **[did** (I)] Ailill and **[did** (I)] Fergus.’²¹⁰

These four verbal forms seem to be indicating simultaneous events. If that would be the case, then all four verbs are Imperfective and should be presented by historical presents. This is not the case here. It could be that these events are truly presented as separate subsequent events, in which case the preterite verbal forms would submit to the hypothesis.

These 21 verbs represent 3.7 % of the total of relevant preterite verbal forms.

§7.4 Usage of *as-beir*

I shall now focus on the verb *as-beir* ‘says’. It has proven quite difficult to assign labels to this verb. If a sentence with *as-beir* is followed by a section of direct speech it becomes hard to discern whether *as-beir* forms a single complete Situation or a Situation that is interrupted by the section of direct speech following it. I have collected all the occurrences of *as-beir* and put them in the following table.

Verbal form:	Total:	Preterite	Perfect	Present	Imperfect
<i>As-beir</i>	103	75.7 % (78)	6.8 % (7)	15.5 % (16)	2% (2)

²⁰⁸ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 214

²⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 102 ll. 3360-1

²¹⁰ Ibid, p. 215

It is clear that the preterite verbal forms of *as-beir* are by far the most frequent. This would suggest that *as-beir* usually represents a single complete Situation. If we turn to the present tense verbal forms we see that of the 16 occurrences, 11 (68.8 %) really represent a historical present. The other 5 occurrences represent the author turning towards the audience and saying something which is in the present tense (e.g. ‘another version **says** that the battle lasted twenty days’). Of those 11 examples of the historical present of *as-beir* all the forms are found in sentences containing multiple verbal forms. Although it is often unclear whether such verbs represent simultaneous events, this could very well be the case here. *As-beir* is a verb that can be enacted during all kinds of other activities (e.g. saying something while walking to Tara). This would mean that *as-beir* behaves similar to the other Old Irish verbal forms. It is, however, hard to determine simultaneous usage of *as-beir*, as both the perfective and imperfective possibility often exists in sentences containing the verb.

7.5 Comparison of historical present and preterite verbal usage

If we would follow the hypothesis stated at the beginning of this chapter, then we can observe a rigid system to indicate the order and nature of the sequence of events of a narrative. Preterite verbal forms indicate perfectivity and historical presents indicate imperfectivity. This removes any contextual ambiguity in the text. The usage of these two different kinds of aspect leads to a narrative sequence of events with a more dynamic nature than we would expect at first glance. The two hypotheses lead to a remarkably balanced picture. If we look at the percentages we can see the following table.

Verbal form:	Total:	Imperfective:	‘?’	Perfective
Historical present	599	68.7 % (412)	29.6 % (177)	1.7 % (10)
Preterite	572	3.7 % (21)	29.7 % (170)	66.6 % (381)

This table illustrates the mirroring function of the historical present and the preterite. I hope that I have adequately shown the proof supporting both hypotheses.

Chapter 8: The Imperfect

In this chapter I shall discuss the usage of imperfect verbal forms as found in the Táin Bó Cúailnge. I shall start by stating my hypothesis regarding this usage. I shall discuss the definition of the imperfect by Thurneysen (1946) and relate my data to this definition. I shall present examples for every aspect of that definition, and discuss the problems that arise when trying to ascertain habituality and iterativity. It has not proven necessary for me to alter the definition stated by Thurneysen (1946), although I have encountered problematic verbs in my database.

Hypothesis: The imperfect is used to indicate an iterative *Aktionsart*.

§8.1 The Database

I shall now present the number of imperfect verbs and their classification in the **IC** (intra-clausal) column of my table. This column is of interest here because it is here that the label Iterative has been put. In my database, this is a single label that encompasses both repeated and customary action.

Verbal form:	Total:	Iterative	Iterative/ Continuous	Continuous	Continuous/ Terminative	Terminative
Imperfect	67	88.1 % (59)	10.4 % (7)	0 % (0)	0 % (0)	1.5 % (1)

It is apparent that the verbal forms that received the label Iterative are by far the most numerous. Together with the category Iterative/ Continuous they consist of 66 of the 67 verbal forms (98.5 %).

§8.2 Usage of the imperfect

Thurneysen (1946) states that “[t]he imperfect or iterative preterite [...] denotes repeated or customary action in past time.”²¹¹. This statement is supported by an analysis of the imperfect

²¹¹ Thurneysen, *Grammar*, p. 331

verbs in the Táin Bó Cúailnge. Thurneysen (1946) presents several examples for these type of actions²¹². One of his examples is a sentence from the Táin.

*‘[N]í laimthe-som do dúscad **co ndúsced** a óenur.’*²¹³

‘[T]hey never dared to wake him **till he woke** of his own accord.’²¹⁴

In this example a habitual action is represented by *co ndúsced* ‘until he awoke’. The sentence describes an event that is a property of a certain period of time (i.e. there was a period of time when no-one dared to awaken him). In my database this verb has thus been labeled Iterative.

Another example of an imperfect verbal form labeled Iterative is the following:

*‘In tan **no théiged** tar carree, **no scarad** a leth a leth ó [a]lailiu. In tan ba réid, **conrictis affrissi.***²¹⁵

‘Whenever Etarcomol’s body **went** over the rocks, one half **would part** from the other; when the path was smooth, the two parts **would come together** again.’²¹⁶

In this example a repeated event is represented by three imperfect verbal forms (*no théiged* ‘went’, *no scarad* ‘parted’ and *conrictis* ‘came together’). The iterativity of these actions is not completely clear when translating the verbal forms as simple pasts. The context and a certain knowledge of the Situation would suggest that the three verbal forms contain an iterative aspect.

Determining whether a verbal form is in fact Iterative can be quite difficult. Sometimes not enough data is given to be able to be certain about the context. An example of such a difficult sentence is the following:

*‘Cét fer ndéinmech dó oc foglaim druidechta úad, is é lín **doninchoisced** Cathbad.’*²¹⁷

‘There were with him a hundred active men learning the druid’s art – that was the number that Cathbad **used to instruct.**’²¹⁸

²¹² Thurneysen, *Grammar*, p. 331

²¹³ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 15 ll. 468-9

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 138

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43 ll. 1379-80

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 163

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19 ll. 611-2

If we scrutinize the translation made by O’Rahilly (1976) we can see that she has translated *doninchoisced* ‘instructed’ as a customary action. If we would only look at the context of the sentence and translate *doninchoisced* as a simple past we would get the following sentence:

‘There were with him a hundred active men learning the druid’s art, that is the number that Cathbad **instructed**.’

This interpretation of the sentence is valid if we only look at the context of the words surrounding *doninchoisced*. It is therefore impossible to determine whether the verbal form represents a repeated, customary Situation or a single Situation. It is our external knowledge of the event of the teaching of the druid that indicates iterativity. We can imagine that he taught often and over a length of time. It is thus probable that the verbal form is iterative.

§8.3 Problematic verbs

Although there are seven cases where an ambiguous interpretation is possible, only one imperfect verbal form excludes the possibility of being iterative.

‘Dogníthi cosair úrlóchra dó 7 frithadart fris.’²¹⁹

‘A litter-bed of fresh rushes with a pillow on it **was prepared** for him.’²²⁰

In this sentence, *dogníthi* ‘was prepared’ could be an imperfect verbal form. It might, however, also be a third person plural preterite verbal form. The sentence does not hold the possibility for *dogníthi* to be iterative. A single unrepeated Situation is represented by the verbal form. I would suggest that this verbal form is in fact the form of the preterite.

It should be noted that despite its name, the imperfect is not the same as imperfective. As I have discussed in chapter five, the intra-clausal and supra-clausal columns represent different kinds of verbal properties. It is possible for an imperfect verbal form to be perfective (e.g. “he repeatedly hit the man. He then went home.”).

The data that I have collected fits within the definition stated by Thurneysen (1946). I shall now turn to the perfect verbal forms.

²¹⁸ Ibid, p. 142

²¹⁹ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 961. 3176

²²⁰ Ibid, p. 209

Chapter 9: The Perfect

With regards to the usage of the perfect verbal forms I have had to distinguish two different parts of the Táin. This is because the perfect verbal forms in the main part of the text behave differently from the perfect verbal forms found in a section of the text, lines 2058-2311, which is a section of text that is in the LU but not in the YBL.

§9.1 The Database

To illustrate the difference in these parts I shall first present the table with the perfect verbal forms and their labels in each section. For this table I have looked at the way in which the verbal form should most probably be translated. A perfect verbal form can be translated as **a.** a traditional perfect, representing an event which began in the past but is still relevant now (i.e. ‘has done’), **b.** a pluperfect, representing an event which began in the past and which was relevant up to the point in time of the story where the verb is mentioned (i.e. ‘had done’) or **c.** a simple past, representing an event in the past without any other temporal implications (i.e. ‘he did’). A question mark has been given to those verbal forms that can be translated in two or more of the ways mentioned above.

Perfect verbal form:	Total:	Perfect	Pluperfect	Simple Past	?
Main text (minus ll. 2058-2311)	172	22.7 % (39)	26.7 % (46)	14.5 % (25)	36.1 % (62)
Ll. 2058-2311	40	0 % (0)	12.5 % (5)	72.5 % (29)	15 % (6)

The percentages presented above show clearly that the two parts are distinct from each other in their usage of the perfect verbal forms. I shall now continue by presenting the view of Thurneysen (1946) on the perfect.

§9.2 Usage of the perfect verbal form

Thurneysen (1946) states that the verbal particle *ro*²²¹ “gives perfective force to the preterite indicative [...] which without it [has] the force of a simple past. The indicative is thereby enabled to distinguish a **perfect** (with **ro**) from a **narrative** tense. The pluperfect, on the other hand, is not distinguished from the perfect.”²²² He gives an example of the difference between a regular preterite and preterite preceded by the verbal particle *ro*- : “**as-bert** ‘[said]’, **as-ru-bart** ‘has said’ and ‘had said’.”²²³ Thurneysen (1946) further notes that in the course of the ninth century *ro*-forms also become used as regular preterite verbal forms.

§9.2.1 Usage of perfect verbal forms in the main text (minus ll. 2058-2311)

Let us now turn to the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. As the narrative is set in the past it can be expected that pluperfect forms (which represent Situations that started prior to the moment in the past which the narrative describes) will be present in the text more frequently than perfect forms (which represent Situations that started prior to the present). As the language of the *Táin* is dated to around the ninth century it may very well be that some *ro*-forms represent simple past verbs. If we look at the main text (minus ll. 2058-2311), we find what we would expect to find.

Perfect verbal form:	Total:	Perfect	Pluperfect	Simple Past	?
Main text (minus ll. 2058-2311)	173	22.5 % (39)	26.6 % (46)	14.5 % (25)	36.4 % (63)

The largest amount of perfect forms (36.4 %) is taken up by ambiguous verbal forms, which could be translated both as pluperfect and simple past. 26.6 % of the verbal forms has to be translated as a pluperfect. An example of this usage is the following:

*‘Lotár uli isa cluchemaig iarom 7 atarachtatár in maic hí ro slassa and.’*²²⁴

²²¹ See chapter 3

²²² Thurneysen, *Grammar*, p. 341

²²³ Idem.

²²⁴ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 15 ll. 455-6

‘So they all went into the playing field. And those boys who **had been knocked down** there rose to their feet[.]’²²⁵

In this example *ro classa* ‘had been knocked down’ should obviously be translated as a pluperfect. The action represented by the verb has begun in the past and has finished before the mentioning of the verb.

25 (14.5 %) instances of the perfect forms represent clear simple pasts. This can then be seen as the first signs of the development that Thurneysen (1946) mentioned. I shall give an example of such a simple past translation:

*‘Ro recair Fergus[.]’*²²⁶

‘Fergus **answered**’²²⁷

In this example it is not so much the context which is given in the sentence itself but the context of the episode which makes it probable that *ro recair* should be translated as ‘answered’. Fergus answers Medb who had addressed him earlier. The direct speech of Medb was introduced by ‘*ba and asbert Medb*’²²⁸, ‘it was then that Medb said’²²⁹. *Asbert* is a preterite verbal form and should be translated as a simple past. It then becomes unlikely for Fergus’ reply to be pluperfect, as the action is in a chronological order subsequent to *asbert*.

The 22.5 % of the perfect verbal forms, which should be translated as perfect forms, need some further explanation. We would not expect to find perfect forms in a narrative set in the past. A sentence like “he has gone to Tara and saw a rabbit” is not feasible in Old Irish as far as we know. How can this high percentage of perfect interpretations then be explained? If we look at the text, we can see that in all 39 cases, the perfect is used when the narrator abandons the narrative to speak directly to his audience. I shall now give an example of this.

*‘Rosagat trá co feótár i nDruim Féine la Conailliu amal atrubrumar remoind.’*²³⁰

‘They travelled on then and spent the night in Druim Féine in Conaille, as we **have related** above.’²³¹

²²⁵ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 137

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8 l. 244

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8 l. 230

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39 ll. 1233-4

This then explains the number of perfect *ro*-forms in the first part of the Táin.

§9.2.2 Usage of perfect verbal forms in ll. 2058-2311

Let us now turn to the second part, the section of text that is recorded in the LU but not in the YBL.

Perfect verbal form:	Total:	Perfect	Pluperfect	Simple Past	?
Ll. 2058-2311	40	0 % (0)	12.5 % (5)	72.5 % (29)	15 % (6)

The percentages in this table are quite dissimilar to those of the first part of the Táin. In this section of the text, a long description is given of how Cú Chulainn and his charioteer Láeg prepare themselves for battle. A long list follows of all the kinds of weapons and armour that the two put on. With the exception of a short section detailing the history of a black overcloak²³², all the perfect verbal forms in this part are either clear simple pasts or ambiguous forms. The verbal which occurs the most in this section and which should be translated with a simple past is shown in the next example:

*'Ro gabastár idata aurslaicthi a ech 7 a del intlassi ina desra. Ro gabastár éssi astuda a ech ina thúasri .i. aradna a ech ina láim chlí re imchommu a aradnachta.*²³³

‘In his right hand he **took** the long spancel of his horses and his ornamented goad. In his left he **grasped** the thongs to check his horses, that is, the reins of his horses which controlled his driving.’²³⁴

This example represents two sentences of a whole sequence of multiple sentences with the same verbal form. The described event is the dressing for war of Láeg and Cú Chulainn. Because of this, it would be most probable to translate these perfect verbal forms as simple pasts.

²³¹ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 159

²³² Ibid, p. 67, ll. 2192-2196

²³³ Ibid, p. 67 ll. 2201-3

²³⁴ Ibid, p. 185

This is disturbing, as it does not fit into the definition presented by Thurneysen (1946) at all. My only conclusion can be that this part of the text is probably a much later addition to the text, hence the high percentage of perfect verbal forms used to express a simple past. This conclusion is supported by Thurneysen (1921)²³⁵ who sees exactly this section as being part of more modern pieces of text that the redactor had access to aside from the original version of the Táin. He assigns this part of the text as being more modern on purely stylistic grounds. This, combined with the usage of the perfect in this section, does indeed suggest that this section of the text is more modern than the main text.

§9.3 Hypothesis

At the end of this chapter I present the hypothesis regarding the usage of perfect verbal forms.

Hypothesis: Perfect verbal forms can be used to indicate the perfect, pluperfect and (at least in the ninth century) simple past.

²³⁵ Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die Irischen Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Halle 1921) pp. 102-7

Chapter 10: The Substantive verb

In this chapter I shall discuss the usage of the substantive verb in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. For this chapter I have mainly utilized the article written by Mac Cana (1994). I have formulated the following hypothesis regarding the usage of the substantive verb.

Hypothesis: The substantive verb is never used as a historical present, the only exception being the verbal forms with an active-durative aspect derived from the stem *bí*.

§10.1 The Database

I shall now give a table containing the relevant data from my database regarding the substantive verb.

Verbal form:	Total:	Present	Preterite	Perfect	<i>bí</i> - form
Substantive verb	218	24.8 % (54)	52.8 % (115)	15.1 % (33)	7.3 % (16)

It should be noted that the 54 accounts of a present tense form of the substantive verb are not in truth historical presents. These present tense forms are used with reference to the present, not the past. The narrator uses these present tense forms to indicate currently existing place-names, which has relevance to the present and is not a part of the narrative in the past. I shall now present an example of this:

*‘Báite dano Reúin ina loch. Is de **atá** Loch Reóin.*²³⁶

‘Then Reúin was drowned in his lake; hence [is] the [place]name Loch Reóin.’²³⁷

§10.2 The substantive verb in relation to the historical present

Mac Cana (1994) states the following with regards to the substantive verb in connection to the historical present.

²³⁶ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 29 l. 928

²³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 151

“What seems to emerge fairly clearly from our survey of some of the relevant evidence in Irish and Welsh is that the verb ‘to be’ sits less easily than other verbs in the context of the historical or narrative present. Semantically its stative sense sets it apart from verbs of action and perception such as occur most frequently in the narrative present, while it is unique in having two sets of present forms. In Irish the verb ‘to be’ normally remains in the preterite even where accompanying verbs are in the narrative present; the active-durative use [...] is a specialized idiom based on the continuative aspect of the *bí*-forms.”²³⁸

This examination of the verb ‘to be’ in relation to the historical present agrees exactly with the data I have gathered from my database. If we would follow the hypothesis presented in chapter six regarding the historical present, the theory of Mac Cana (1994) offers a further argument for the imperfective nature of the historical present. As Mac Cana (1994) puts it, the reason why the verb ‘to be’ does not participate in the switching between tenses is because of its “stative sense”²³⁹.

I have now discussed all the categories of verbs with regards to their usage in a narrative.

²³⁸ Mac Cana, *Ériu* 45, p. 149

²³⁹ Idem.

Summary & Conclusion

I shall now summarize the main points of this thesis. By analyzing all the verbal forms used in the Old Irish text *Táin Bó Cúailnge* I have endeavoured to investigate the usage of the historical present in Old Irish narrative prose. All verbal forms were labeled according to different types of criteria regarding their contextual ‘footprint’. I have linked these labels to the terminology used in the study of verbal aspect. This labeling has resulted in a large table presenting the contextual function of every verbal form.

I then formulated several hypotheses regarding the usage of different types of verbal forms to represent a past event. It was necessary to focus on all these types of verbal forms as the usage of the historical present could not be researched independently. These hypotheses were then discussed in detail, with examples from the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

I have endeavoured to show that the historical present is used to indicate imperfectivity. When a sequence of verbal forms (i.e. two or more verbal forms that occur in subsequent clauses) is put in the present tense the verbs become temporally closely linked. They represent one single Situation (e.g. he went to them and carried his spear with him). When a historical present is followed by the conjunction *co* ‘until’, the imperfectivity lies in that the action of the present tense verb is interrupted (incomplete) before the next verb (the verb following *co*) occurs (e.g. they travelled until they were at Tara). It would appear that the author of a text could also imply a temporally close link between two verbs even if they are in fact perfective by using present tense verbal forms. This can be illustrated by the English ‘arriving at Tara, he saw a bird’ in opposition to ‘he arrived at Tara. He saw a bird’. In the first example the author creates the suggestion of one single Situation.

The preterite verbal forms show the opposite of the historical present. Preterite verbs are, according to my hypothesis, used to indicate perfectivity. Preterite verbs represent single, complete Situations. An example of this is the following sequence of sentences: “Fergus went to Tara. He saw a bird.” If preterite verbal forms were used to represent ‘went’ and ‘saw’ then the bird was seen only after Fergus completed his journey to Tara. The two sentences represent two distinct complete Situations. The percentages, which I derived from my database, show a mirror-relation between the usage of the historical present and preterite verbal forms. The preterite verbal forms do show a slightly larger amount of problematic

verbal forms, but the majority of those verbs have been demonstrated to be Middle Irish. We could then deduce that the function of the historical present to indicate imperfectivity declines in the development of Old Irish to Middle Irish.

My hypothesis regarding the usage of the imperfect follows the traditional view of the function of the imperfect by Thurneysen (1946). In the *Táin*, the imperfect is used to indicate iterativity.

The perfect verbal forms are mainly used to indicate pluperfect and perfect meanings. It has, however, become clear that in the text of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* the perfect particle *ro-* has begun to lose its perfect semantic load. We find perfect verbs used to indicate simple past meanings in a portion of the total of perfect verbal forms.

In my final chapter I discussed the substantive verb and its relation to the historical present. I follow Mac Cana (1994) in his view that the substantive does not participate in the usage of present tense forms to indicate a past event.

At the end of this thesis I hope to have answered the question why and how present tense verbal forms are used to indicate an event in the past. If my hypotheses are accepted, then a new feature of the Old Irish language has been discovered. In future translations of Old Irish narrative prose texts we can utilize the hypothesis regarding the usage of the historical present in order to arrive at the correct interpretation of the text. The element of imperfectivity, which historical presents represent, results in translations of prose texts that are dynamic and full of tension, rather than a simple chronological summary of past events.

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Appendix A: The Database

The following pages contain the table that has served as my database for this thesis. It contains all the verbal forms in the Táin Bó Cúailnge in the order of the lines of the text. In order to clarify certain important points when dealing with the table I will now discuss several elements of the table and the making of the table.

Telic and Atelic:

Although every verb normally only has one value (i.e. a given verb is either telic or atelic) in this table it is possible to find several forms of a single verb with different labels. This is because the exact translations of Old Irish verbs are not always available. If a verb could be translated in English with both a telic and atelic aspect I followed the context in determining the correct label for that specific occurrence of that verb.

Imperfective, Perfective and ?:

These labels have proven to be the most important labels of my research. These labels are context-sensitive and I deemed it necessary to present the criteria I used when determining whether a verbal form was Imperfective, Perfective or ?.

A verbal form has been labeled Imperfective if:

1. The action expressed by the verb is simultaneous to another action expressed by a verbal form.
2. The action expressed by the verb is followed by *co* ‘until’.
3. The action expressed by the verb temporally overlaps another action expressed by a verbal form.
4. The action expressed by the verb is still ongoing when another verbal action occurs which operates within or as part of the action expressed by the first verb.

A verbal form has been labeled Perfective if:

1. The action expressed by the verb is the last action of a given episode.
2. The action expressed by the verb is followed by *co* ‘so that, and’.
3. The action expressed by the verb is preceded by *co* ‘until, so that, and’.

4. The action expressed by the verb is a clear complete part of a sequence of chronologically ordered events.

A verbal form has been labeled ‘?’ if:

1. The action expressed by the verb is in a temporally unclear situation.
2. The action precedes *co* without a certain translation (i.e. instances where *co* could mean both ‘until’ and ‘so that, and’)
3. The action expressed by the verb temporally overlaps another action but is not semantically connected (i.e. if no syntactical element is shared by both sentences)
4. The translation of the verbal form is ambiguous of itself (e.g. if there are two equally possible translations of a verbal form which would make it either Imperfective or Perfective).

All labels in the SC-column have been numbered according to the classifications above (e.g. Imperfective 3, Perfective 2, ? 2, etc.) in order to clarify the process involved in choosing which label was most correct.