Morphology and Locality: A case study of Irish
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1 THE ISSUE
In every theory and subfield of linguistics, the researcher must ask questions related to locality. Here, I will investigate questions of locality in morphology. Bobaljik (2012) claims that the locality conditions for allomorphy selection (e.g. go~went in English) are confined, simplifying slightly, to the morphological word. Namely, allomorphy may not be triggered across maximal projection boundaries. This is schematized in (1) and (2), where α triggers allomorphy on β.

\[ (1) \quad \alpha \ldots \top X \ldots \beta \]

\[ (2) \quad *\alpha \ldots \top Y \ldots \beta \]

Bobaljik’s proposed condition is important because it makes possible an understanding of some very robust, and otherwise unexpected, typological generalizations. But there are data from Irish, the dependent/independent alternation, which seem to threaten Bobaljik’s generalization. The dependent/independent alternation is suppletive verbal allomorphy triggered by complementizers (C’s), such as the negative complementizer ní in (4).

\[ (3) \quad \text{Bhí mé ann.} \]

\[ \text{be.PAST I there} \]

\[ \text{‘I was there.’} \]

\[ (4) \quad \text{Ní raibh mé ann} \]

\[ \text{NEG be.PAST.DEP I there} \]

\[ \text{‘I was not there.’} \]

(3-4) seem anomalous because in syntactic terms the trigger (C) is separated from the element it affects by at least one (TP), and possibly more, maximal projection boundaries, apparently violating (2).

2 PROPOSAL
I argue that the data in (3-4) do not threaten Bobaljik’s generalization. I propose that the complementizer and the finite verb in Irish do form the right local configuration for Bobaljik. This is derived from a process of complementizer lowering (McCloskey, 1996), which is a kind of morphological lowering (Embick & Noyer 2001, Harley & Noyer 1999, Oda 2012, a.o.), of C to the position of the verb. Complementizer lowering (C-lowering) in Irish was originally proposed by McCloskey (1996). McCloskey argues that all C’s lower post-syntactically to the position of the verb and that C-lowering is driven by the prosodic weakness of C.

I claim that this prosodic account of C-lowering in Irish cannot be correct. First, some C’s are single unstressed vowels (an [a], the interrogative marker) while others are heavy syllables, with either a long vowel (ní [nîː]) or the bimoraic sequence -ach [ax] (e.g., nach [nax]) (see Bennett (Submitted) for the argument for bimoraicity of this sequence). Therefore, C’s in Irish are not a uniform prosodic class, even though all C’s undergo C-lowering. Second, I argue that a prosodic account misses an important generalization. C may adjoin to and only to the finite verb; it is not the case that it simply must lean to the phonological material to its right.

Instead, I contend that Embick and Noyer (2001)’s account of morphological lowering is best here. Embick and Noyer’s formalism for lowering is shown in (5).

\[ (5) \quad [ \top X \ldots [ \top Y \ldots Y^o \ldots ] ] \rightarrow [ \top X \ldots [ \top Y \ldots [ Y^o \ldots X^o \ldots ] ] ] \]

By applying this lowering process to Irish, we create a complex head in which C adjoins to the verb. If we assume such lowering for C in Irish, this then provides exactly the local relation required by Bobaljik’s locality condition for allomorphy selection (1-2). So, the apparent counterexamples (3-4) to Bobaljik’s generalization in (1-2) are not so mysterious, and we may maintain Bobaljik’s generalization if we claim that lowering feeds allomorphy selection, as would be expected given the architecture of Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993). Therefore, Irish provides interesting evidence for the locality conditions in (1-2) because its apparent non-local allomorphy selection is actually quite local, given morphological C-lowering.