Class Four—The Substantive Verb

A Few Important Facts First...

Word Order

First off, as you have probably noticed, Irish is a ‘Verb-Subject-Object’ language. That means that, generally speaking, the verb occurs at the beginning of a simple sentence in Irish. Any verbal particles [e.g. negative, interrogative etc.] will precede the verb in such cases, however.

*When the verb does NOT occupy the initial position in the sentence, it is for special reasons which must be discussed according to context. [We’ll get to all this later!!!]

‘Yes’ and ‘No’

There is no word for ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in Irish. Instead, you simply respond to a question by using the ‘responsive’ form of the verb used in the question. In the case of the substantive verb, for example, if one were to ask:

An bhfuil tú tuirseach? – ‘Are you tired?’

You could simply respond with either:

Tá – ‘Yes’ or Nil – ‘No’.

The Indefinite Article [and a bit on the Definite Article]

There is no indefinite article in Irish. Thus, fear means ‘man’ or ‘a man’, and cailín means ‘girl’ or ‘a girl’.

*As you have most likely noticed in your homework exercises, ‘an’ is the form of the definite article in the singular. You may also have discovered that ‘an’ causes a séimhiú before certain nouns [an bhean, e.g.]. The rule is that the definite article causes lenition of feminine nouns in the nominative singular.

**Feminine nouns beginning with a vowel are not affected, but a ‘t’ is prefixed to feminine nouns beginning with ‘s’ [EXCEPT those beginning with the clusters ‘sc’, ‘sp’, ‘st’, and ‘sm’. So, an tsráid – ‘the street’, but an spéir – ‘the sky’. ]
***Masculine nouns beginning with a vowel get a ‘t-‘ prefix in the nominative singular. So, *an t-úll* – the apple. But much more on the definite article later...

*The Vocative Case*

Changes often occur to a person’s name when he or she is addressed directly or called.

With female names, a *séimhiú* is added after the vocative particle, *a*:

Siobhán → a Shiobhán  
Cáit → a Cháit

With masculine names, however, a *séimhiú* is still added after the vocative particle, *a*, but an ‘*i*’ is often added before the final consonant as well, making it slender.

Seán → a Sheán  
Séamas → a Shéamais

*The Substantive Verb, ‘*b*í’*

The verb ‘*Tá*’ originally meant ‘stands’, but has come to mean ‘is’. However, it is NOT used to link two nouns or pronouns—for this we use the Copula. Thus, the Copula ‘identifies’ and ‘classifies’ things, whereas the substantive verb is used to describe more temporary states and qualities.

**The Copula has many other functions as we will come to discover in a week or two. For example, when introducing yourself [*Mise Matt = ‘Is mise Mait* with ‘Zero Copula’], talking about nationality, occupations, likes and dislikes, comparatives and superlatives, or ownership, you will use the Copula. But, as I say, more on this later.

The Substantive Verb, like a few other Irish verbs as we shall see, also has a *Dependent* form—used after most verbal particles [negative, interrogative, etc.]. This form, based on the Old Irish ‘*fil*’, originally meant ‘sees’, but has taken on the alternate meaning of ‘is’. In the form ‘*Níl*’, for example, we can see that original ‘*Ní + fil*’ has been elided.

*When a sentence with the verb ‘*Tá*’ does not contain an adjective [e.g. *Tá Cáit tinn* – ‘Kate is sick’], or and adverb or adverbial phrase of place [e.g. *Tá Cáit anseo* – ‘Kate is here’], the word *ann* is inserted: *Tá caillín ann* – ‘There is a girl there/A girl exists’. 

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Positive, *Independent Forms of the Substantive*:

Tá mé -- I am
Tá tú -- you are
Tá sé -- he is
Tá sí -- she is
Tá muid -- we are
Tá sibh -- you are (pl)
Tá siad -- they are

Negative, *Dependent Forms of the Substantive*:

Nil mé -- I am not
Nil tú -- you are not
Nil sé -- he is not
Nil sí -- she is not
Nil muid -- we are not
Nil sibh -- you are not (pl)
Nil siad -- they are not

*Interrogative, Dependent Forms of the Substantive*:

An bhfuil mé? -- am I?
An bhfuil tú? -- are you?
An bhfuil sé? -- is he?
An bhfuil sí? -- is she?
An bhfuil muid? -- are we?
An bhfuil sibh? -- are you? (pl)
An bhfuil siad? -- are they?