

Conjugated forms of the preposition *a* as a pronoun in Breton

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There are two types of pronoun – independent and dependent – in Breton. In most cases, independent forms are used for the subject and dependent forms for the object. Since the 17th century, conjugated forms of the preposition *a* (forms of the preposition *a* ‘of, from’ fused with personal suffixes) started to replace dependent object pronouns. Now this conjugated *a* is also used as the subject of intransitive verbs, and appears to have become an ergative-absolutive case marker, although this is difficult to confirm because of the absence of a clear split.

I present the results of a recent survey I conducted on Breton speakers to confirm the difference between dependent object pronouns and conjugated *a* forms. My survey shows that the difference between the two is not semantic but syntactic. The dependent pronoun tends to co-occur with non-finite forms more than with finite forms, while the conjugated *a* can co-occur with both forms. My survey also shows that although most speakers tend to use conjugated *a*, three speakers (two speakers in their twenties and one speaker of the Gwened (Fr. Vannetais) dialect) primarily use dependent object pronouns. This suggests a socio-linguistic aspect to this problem.

The conjugated *a* as the subject of intransitive verbs involves a very different situation than that of the pronominal object. The use of the conjugated *a* as a subject is in the process of spreading now, from use in negative clauses to affirmative clauses, and from copula phrases to past sentences with *bezañ* (be). The use of the conjugated *a* as the subject of intransitive verbs is a key to understanding the features of this new pronoun system.