



Mapping the Continuum: A Distributional Analysis of Grammatical Gradience in Scottish Gaelic Verbal Nouns

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ABSTRACT

Background: The categorial status of the verbal noun in Scottish Gaelic, and Celtic languages more broadly, has been a subject of longstanding debate. Traditional analyses often force it into a discrete classification as either a verb or a noun, failing to capture the full spectrum of its syntactic behaviour. This study challenges such binary approaches by adopting a framework of grammatical gradience [1, 66], which posits that linguistic categories are often fuzzy and continuous rather than discrete. The primary aim is to systematically map the distributional properties of Scottish Gaelic verbal nouns onto a verb-noun continuum.

Methods: A qualitative distributional analysis was conducted, drawing examples from authoritative grammars [69, 111], existing linguistic literature, and corpora. A set of syntactic and morphological criteria was established to serve as metrics for "verb-ness" (e.g., object case assignment, adverbial modification) and "noun-ness" (e.g., determiner selection, adjectival modification). Various constructions featuring the verbal noun were systematically evaluated against these criteria.

Results: The analysis reveals a clear functional continuum. At one pole, constructions involving determiners and adjectival modifiers show the verbal noun behaving as a prototypical noun. At the opposite pole, in progressive and perfective aspect constructions, it exhibits prototypical verbal properties. Critically, the study identifies several intermediate constructions that display a hybrid mix of verbal and nominal syntax. This is most evident in perfective 'possessive' constructions and purposive clauses, where the verbal noun simultaneously exhibits features traditionally associated with both lexical categories, challenging any attempt at discrete classification.

Conclusion: The findings suggest conclusively that the Scottish Gaelic verbal noun is not a discrete category but a gradient one, whose position on the continuum is determined by its specific syntactic environment. This study contributes a more nuanced model for Gaelic syntax and provides strong empirical support for theories that treat grammatical categories as non-discrete, emergent properties of language use [29, 74].

Keywords

Scottish Gaelic, Verbal Noun, Grammatical Gradience, Lexical Categories, Syntactic Analysis, Celtic Linguistics, Distributionalism.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of lexical categories, often referred to as 'parts of speech', represents one of the most foundational

areas of linguistic inquiry. Since the time of the classical grammarians, scholars have sought to create taxonomies of words based on their morphological, syntactic, and semantic properties [18, 104]. Within this tradition, the distinction between the noun and the verb has been held as the most fundamental, representing a near-universal division in the world's languages between entities and processes [8, 49, 70]. Nouns prototypically refer to time-stable things, while verbs prototypically refer to actions, events, or states that unfold in time. This distinction is typically reflected in the distinct grammatical machinery with which each category is associated; nouns inflect for case and number, while verbs inflect for tense, aspect, and mood [39].

However, the neatness of this binary opposition has been consistently challenged by linguistic data from across the globe, revealing that the boundary between 'noun' and 'verb' is often porous and indistinct [21, 54]. This challenge is nowhere more apparent than in the analysis of non-finite verbal forms, such as infinitives, participles, and gerunds, which frequently display a hybrid collection of properties. Within the Celtic language family, this categorical ambiguity is institutionalised in the form of the verbal noun (VN), a unique grammatical entity that has perplexed grammarians for centuries [101]. From Irish [9, 51, 84] to Welsh [7, 15, 122] and Breton [6, 110], the verbal noun serves as the primary non-finite verb form, yet it simultaneously exhibits a range of conspicuously nominal characteristics.

This study focuses on the verbal noun in Scottish Gaelic, a language where its categorial indeterminacy is particularly pronounced. The Gaelic VN can, for instance, be preceded by a definite article like a noun, yet it can also take a direct object like a verb. It can be the complement of a preposition, yet it forms the core of periphrastic tense and aspect constructions that are functionally equivalent to finite verb phrases in other languages [3, 69]. Early Gaelic grammarians, from Shaw [106] and Stewart [111] to Calder [19], recognised this dual nature, often describing it with labels such as 'participial noun' or simply noting its versatile functions without resolving its fundamental status. More contemporary linguistic analyses have attempted to force the Gaelic VN into a single category, with some scholars arguing for a fundamentally nominal base from which verbal properties are derived [93], while others implicitly treat it as a verb in specific syntactic contexts [2, 85].

Such binary analyses, we argue, are ultimately inadequate. They fail to capture the systematic and predictable variation in the VN's behaviour across different syntactic environments. Forcing this multifaceted category into a single box obscures the very nature of its linguistic function. This paper proposes an alternative approach, grounded in the theoretical framework of grammatical gradience [1, 14]. This perspective, which draws on insights from prototype theory and cognitive linguistics [68, 71, 97], rejects the classical Aristotelian view of categories as discrete, all-or-nothing entities. Instead, it posits that grammatical categories are often gradient, with central (prototypical) members and a periphery of less typical members that may share properties with adjacent categories [30, 66]. From this viewpoint, the Scottish Gaelic verbal noun is not a categorical anomaly to be explained away, but rather a prime exemplar of a linguistic category that is best understood as a continuum.

The primary aim of this research is, therefore, to move beyond a binary classification and systematically map the syntactic behaviour of the Scottish Gaelic verbal noun onto a continuum ranging from maximally noun-like to maximally verb-like. We hypothesise that the VN's position on this continuum is not random but is directly associated with the specific syntactic construction in which it appears. By undertaking a detailed distributional analysis, we seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What specific distributional properties (e.g., case assignment, modification possibilities, determiner selection) characterise the verbal and nominal poles of the verbal noun continuum in Scottish Gaelic?
2. How do different syntactic constructions systematically predict the position of a verbal noun construction on this verb-noun continuum, and what does this reveal about the function of these constructions?

To address these questions, this article will first outline the theoretical framework of gradience and the specific distributional methodology employed (Section 2). Section 3 will present the core results of the analysis,

systematically examining a range of constructions and demonstrating how they populate the entire spectrum from the nominal to the verbal pole, paying special attention to key hybrid cases. Section 4 will discuss the implications of these findings, arguing that a gradient model not only provides a more empirically adequate description of Scottish Gaelic syntax but also offers significant insights into the nature of lexical categories cross-linguistically [28, 59]. We will conclude that embracing gradience is essential for a complete understanding of grammatical systems, moving beyond inherited categorical distinctions towards a more nuanced, usage-based conception of language structure [29, 74].

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the gradient nature of the Scottish Gaelic verbal noun, this study adopts a multi-faceted approach grounded in distributional analysis and informed by theoretical frameworks that accommodate categorical indeterminacy, namely Cognitive Grammar and Construction Grammar. This section details the theoretical underpinnings, the sources of data, and the specific analytical criteria used to map the verb-noun continuum.

2.1. Theoretical Framework: Distributionalism and Gradience

The methodological foundation of this paper is distributionalism, a principle most famously articulated by Bloomfield [12], which posits that the grammatical identity of a linguistic unit is defined by the sum of all environments in which it can occur. In this view, lexical categories are not predetermined by semantic or notional criteria (e.g., 'a noun is a person, place, or thing') but are emergent properties of syntactic behaviour [103]. Two words belong to the same category if and only if they share the same range of syntactic distributions. While strict Bloomfieldian distributionalism can be overly rigid, its core insight remains powerful: syntactic frames are the primary diagnostic for categorial status. Our analysis, therefore, relies on a set of syntactic tests designed to probe the extent to which the Gaelic VN distributes like a prototypical noun versus a prototypical verb.

However, a purely formal distributionalism is descriptive rather than explanatory. To understand why the verbal noun exhibits such varied distribution, we integrate principles from cognitive and constructionist approaches. From Cognitive Grammar, we adopt Langacker's [71, 74] rejection of discrete categories in favour of schematic networks and prototypes. Langacker argues that the noun-verb distinction is fundamentally cognitive, relating to how we construe experience: nouns profile 'regions' in some domain (conceptual things), while verbs profile 'processes' (conceptual events) [70]. The Gaelic VN, in this light, can be seen as a flexible lexical item whose profile can be shifted towards either a region or a process depending on the context. Its inherent schematic nature allows it to be elaborated by different constructions to produce a range of more specific meanings and functions.

This leads directly to Construction Grammar, which posits that constructions—form-meaning pairings that exist independently of the lexical items that fill them—are the basic units of language [29, 50]. The meaning and grammatical properties of an utterance are not derived solely from its constituent words but from the interaction between the words and the constructions they appear in. From this perspective, the verbal noun does not have a single, fixed categorial status. Instead, it is inserted into various syntactic constructions (e.g., the progressive aspect construction, the definite noun phrase construction), and it is the construction itself that confers a specific set of verbal or nominal properties upon it. Our analysis is therefore not just of the VN itself, but of the various 'VN-constructions' and their role in determining its place on the gradience scale. This approach aligns with the view that parts of speech are language-particular and construction-specific phenomena, rather than pre-established universal categories [55, 57].

2.2. Data Sources

The data for this study are drawn from a wide range of authoritative sources to ensure empirical robustness and to reflect established grammatical conventions in Scottish Gaelic. As a qualitative study of syntactic structures, the primary data consists of grammatical examples, which have been compiled and cross-referenced from the following:

1. Descriptive and Reference Grammars: A comprehensive set of grammars spanning over two centuries provides the core data. This includes seminal early works [19, 43, 86, 111], which offer insight into historical usage, as well as the most comprehensive modern reference grammars, particularly Lamb [69] and the works of Adger [3, 5]. These sources provide curated examples of a vast array of VN constructions.
2. Pedagogical Materials: Advanced Gaelic textbooks and learning materials [e.g., 82, 88] were consulted, as they often provide clear examples of grammatical contrasts and are designed to reflect standard usage, conforming to guidelines like the SQA's orthographic conventions [105].
3. Linguistic Literature: Seminal articles and monographs on Gaelic and Celtic syntax were reviewed for relevant examples and analyses. This includes key works on Gaelic syntax [2, 24, 80, 93], comparative Celtic studies [100, 101], and specific studies on the verbal noun in related languages such as Irish [45, 51, 65] and Welsh [15, 42, 122].

By synthesizing data from these sources, we ensure that the analysis is grounded in a consensus view of Gaelic grammar while also engaging with the theoretical nuances explored in the academic literature.

2.3. Analytical Criteria: Measuring Verb-ness and Noun-ness

To operationalise the concept of a verb-noun continuum, we established a set of eight key distributional criteria. Each criterion represents a syntactic or morphological property prototypically associated with either nouns or verbs. The behaviour of a given VN construction with respect to these criteria determines its position on the continuum.

Prototypical Nominal Properties:

1. Occurrence with Determiners: The ability to be preceded by an article (an/am, 'the') or demonstrative (an...seo/sin/ud, 'this/that/that yonder') is a core diagnostic of noun phrases [94]. We test whether a VN can appear in such frames (e.g., an sgriobhadh, 'the writing').
2. Modification by Adjectives: Nouns are prototypically modified by adjectives [8]. We test if the VN can be directly modified by an adjective (e.g., sgriobhadh math, 'good writing').
3. Pluralisation: The capacity to be marked for plural number is a central morphological feature of count nouns. We examine whether the VN can take a plural form (e.g., òrain, 'songs' from VN òran, 'singing').
4. Functioning as a Prepositional Complement: Noun phrases, but not verb phrases, typically function as the complement of a preposition [3]. We test if the VN can follow prepositions like airson ('for') or mu ('about') (e.g., airson sgriobhadh, 'for writing').

Prototypical Verbal Properties:

5. Taking a Direct Object: A key feature of transitive verbs is their ability to license a direct object, which in Gaelic is typically unmarked for case and follows the verb [3, 77]. We test whether the VN can be followed by such a direct object (e.g., sgriobhadh litir, 'writing a letter'). This is contrasted with the nominal strategy of taking a genitive complement (sgriobhadh litreach, 'the writing of a letter').
6. Modification by Adverbs: Verbs and verb phrases are prototypically modified by adverbs that specify the manner, time, or place of the action [61]. We test if the VN can be modified by adverbs (e.g., a' draibheadh gu slaodach, 'driving slowly').
7. Association with Aspectual Particles: In Gaelic, the progressive and perfective aspects are formed periphrastically using the substantive verb tha ('be') plus an aspectual particle and the VN. The progressive particle a' (ag) and perfective air ('after') are exclusively associated with verbal contexts [2, 69]. The presence of these particles is a strong indicator of verb-like function.
8. Licensing an Agentive Phrase: The ability to license an agent argument expressed in a specific way (e.g., via a le-phrase, 'by') in passive-like constructions is a property of verbs. We analyse how the agent is expressed in different VN constructions.

The analytical procedure involves taking a wide range of attested VN constructions and systematically evaluating

each one against these eight criteria. A construction that satisfies all nominal criteria and no verbal criteria is placed at the nominal pole. A construction that satisfies all verbal criteria and no nominal criteria is placed at the verbal pole. Constructions that exhibit a mixture of properties from both lists are classified as intermediate, and their precise position on the continuum is determined by the specific combination of features they display. This systematic evaluation allows for a nuanced mapping of the VN's functional range.

RESULTS: Mapping the Verbal Noun Continuum

The distributional analysis reveals that the Scottish Gaelic verbal noun operates not as a single, discrete category but as a flexible lexical item whose properties are determined by its syntactic environment. Its behaviour populates a full continuum from a prototypical noun to a prototypical non-finite verb. This section presents the results of this analysis, starting with the clear endpoints of the continuum—the nominal and verbal poles—before moving to the more complex and revealing intermediate cases that demonstrate the true nature of gradience.

3.1. The Nominal Pole: The VN as a Prototypical Noun

When used as a lexical derivation to refer to the abstract concept of an action or its result, the verbal noun exhibits the full range of prototypical nominal properties. In these contexts, it is syntactically indistinguishable from any other abstract noun.

Consider the VN *sgrìobhadh* ('writing'). In a construction like (1), it demonstrates a cluster of purely nominal features:

- (1) *Chòrd an sgrìobhadh math sin rium.*
(pleased the writing good that with-me)
'I liked that good writing.'

Here, *sgrìobhadh* is:

- Preceded by the definite article *an* (Criterion 1).
- Modified by the post-posed adjective *math* ('good') (Criterion 2).
- Modified by the demonstrative *sin* ('that'), a hallmark of the noun phrase.

Furthermore, many VNs that refer to concrete results can be pluralised (Criterion 3), such as *togail* ('building, lifting') which has the plural *togalaichean* ('buildings'), and *òran* ('singing') which has the plural *òrain* ('songs'). They also freely serve as complements to prepositions (Criterion 4), as in (2):

- (2) *Tha mi a' bruidhinn mu dheidhinn seinn.*
(am I at talking about singing)
'I am talking about singing.'

Crucially, in these nominal constructions, all verbal properties are absent. The VN cannot take a direct object; any 'object' must be expressed as a genitive noun phrase, a classic nominal strategy, as seen in the contrast between (3a) and (3b):

- (3a) *Sgrìobhadh na litreach a' còrdadh rium.* (Nominal)
(writing the-GEN letter-GEN at pleasing with-me)
'The writing of the letter pleases me.'
(3b) **Sgrìobhadh an litir a' còrdadh rium.* * (Ungrammatical)
(writing the letter...)

Here, *litreach* is the genitive of *litir* ('letter'). The inability to license a direct object (3b) is a clear sign that the VN is functioning as a noun. Similarly, it cannot be modified by an adverb; one must use an adjectival construction (e.g., *sgrìobhadh a bha luath*, 'writing that was fast', not **sgrìobhadh gu luath*). There are no aspectual particles present. In every respect, the VN at this pole behaves as a prototypical noun [94].

3.2. The Verbal Pole: The VN in Progressive Aspect Constructions

At the opposite end of the continuum, the verbal noun functions as the core of a non-finite verb phrase, particularly

in the progressive aspect construction. This construction is formed with the substantive verb *tha* ('be') followed by the subject, the progressive particle *a'* (a contraction of *ag*), and the VN.

(4) *Tha Calum a' sgrìobhadh litir gu sgiobalta.*

(is Calum at writing letter quickly)

'Calum is writing a letter quickly.'

In this construction, the VN *sgrìobhadh* displays a cluster of purely verbal features:

- It takes a direct object, *litir*, which follows it directly and is in the common case (Criterion 5). The nominal genitive strategy (*a' sgrìobhadh litreach*) would be ungrammatical here.
- It is modified by the adverb *gu sgiobalta* ('quickly') (Criterion 6). Adjectival modification (**a' sgrìobhadh sgiobalta*) is impossible.
- It is obligatorily preceded by the aspectual particle *a'* (Criterion 7). The particle has no meaning outside of this verbal context and cannot be used with prototypical nouns.
- The entire phrase *a' sgrìobhadh litir gu sgiobalta* functions as a verb phrase predicate.

Simultaneously, all nominal properties are suppressed. The VN in this frame cannot be preceded by a determiner (**tha Calum an a' sgrìobhadh*), cannot be modified by an adjective, and cannot be pluralised. Its function is unequivocally verbal [77], serving as the lexical core of the predicate in a manner analogous to the English present participle. The same verbal behaviour is observed in other periphrastic constructions, such as the prospective future with *a' dol gu* ('going to').

3.3. Intermediate Cases: The Gradience in Action

The most compelling evidence for a continuum lies in the numerous constructions where the verbal noun exhibits a hybrid mix of nominal and verbal properties. These intermediate cases cannot be neatly categorised and demonstrate that verb-ness and noun-ness are not mutually exclusive properties.

3.3.1. The Perfective Aspect 'Possessive' Construction

One of the most widely discussed hybrid constructions is the periphrastic perfect, often formed using the preposition *air* ('on, after') in combination with a possessive pronoun that agrees with the logical object.

(5) *Tha an litir air a sgrìobhadh (le Calum).*

(is the letter on its writing (by Calum))

'The letter has been written (by Calum).'

This construction is functionally verbal, expressing perfective aspect, equivalent to the English present perfect passive. It displays clear verbal properties:

- It licenses an optional agent phrase with the preposition *le* ('by') (*le Calum*), a classic verbal feature (Criterion 8).
- It functions within a verbal periphrastic frame with the verb *tha*.

However, it also retains conspicuous nominal syntax:

- The structure is literally 'the letter is on its writing'. The possessive pronoun *a* ('his/its') grammatically modifies the VN *sgrìobhadh*. The use of a possessive pronoun is a property of noun phrases.
- Historically and structurally, this is a prepositional phrase (*air* + noun phrase), where the noun phrase consists of a possessive pronoun and the VN. This satisfies Criterion 4 (functioning as a prepositional complement), a nominal property.

This construction thus sits in the middle of the continuum. It leverages nominal syntax (a possessed noun phrase as the complement of a preposition) to achieve a fully verbal, aspectual function. Forcing it into either category misses the essence of the construction, which is precisely this syntactic blending.

3.3.2. Purposive Clauses with *gu*

Another key intermediate case involves purposive clauses, which in Gaelic are often introduced by the preposition

gu ('to, towards') followed by the VN.

(6) Chaidh e a-mach gu an dorus a dhùnadh.

(went he out to the door its closing)

'He went out to close the door.'

Here, the phrase headed by gu expresses purpose, a function often fulfilled by infinitival clauses in other languages.

Let's analyse its properties:

- Verbal: The VN dhùnadh ('closing') takes what appears to be a direct object, an dorus ('the door'). This object is preposed before the VN and triggers a possessive pronoun (a) on the VN, a structure known as the 'object-as-possessor' construction. Despite the unusual word order, this argument structure is a verbal property (Criterion 5).
- Nominal: The entire clause is introduced by the preposition gu, meaning the VN phrase functions as the complement of a preposition (Criterion 4). This structure (gu + [object + a + VN]) is syntactically a prepositional phrase, a nominal characteristic.

This construction is less nominal than the perfective in (5) because the object's relationship to the VN is more direct, but it is less verbal than the progressive in (4) because its syntax is still framed by a preposition. It occupies another distinct point on the continuum.

3.3.3. The VN with the Preposition ri

The preposition ri ('to, against, busy with') can combine with the VN to create a sense of ongoing action or occupation.

(7) Bha i ri sgrìobhadh fad an fheasgair.

(was she at writing all the afternoon)

'She was writing all afternoon.'

This construction is similar to the progressive aspect construction (4) in meaning, but its syntax is subtly different and places it at a different point on the continuum.

- Verbal: It describes an event and can be modified by duration adverbials (fad an fheasgair). If a direct object is included, it follows the VN (ri sgrìobhadh litrichean, 'writing letters').
- Nominal: Unlike the true progressive, it does not use the dedicated aspectual particle a'. Instead, it uses a standard preposition, ri. This makes the phrase ri sgrìobhadh a prepositional phrase, satisfying Criterion 4. It feels more like the English phrase 'at work' or 'at prayer' than a true verb phrase.

This construction is more verbal than a simple prepositional complement like mu sheinn ('about singing') because it denotes an event with temporal extension and can take an object, but it is more nominal than the a' progressive because it lacks the dedicated grammatical marker of aspect.

3.4. Summary: Visualising the Continuum

The analysis shows that different syntactic constructions activate different combinations of verbal and nominal properties in the VN. This can be visualised as a scale, with constructions populating various points along it.

Table 1. The Verb-Noun Continuum of Scottish Gaelic VN Constructions

Position on Continuum	Construction Example	Nominal Properties Active	Verbal Properties Active
Maximally Nominal	<i>An sgrìobhadh math</i> (<i>'The good writing'</i>)	Determiner, Adjective, Genitive Complement,	None

		Pluralisable	
Highly Nominal	<i>Airson sgrìobhadh</i> (‘For writing’)	Prepositional Complement	None
Mid-Point (Nominal Syntax)	<i>Tha an litir air a sgrìobhadh</i> (‘The letter is written’)	Prepositional Comp., Possessive pronoun	Agent <i>le</i> -phrase, Aspectual function
Mid-Point (Verbal Syntax)	<i>Ri sgrìobhadh litir</i> (‘(Busy) writing a letter’)	Prepositional Comp.	Takes Direct Object, Adverbial Mod.
Highly Verbal	<i>Gu an dorus a dhùnadh</i> (‘To close the door’)	Prepositional Comp.	Object-as-possessor argument structure, Purposive function
Maximally Verbal	<i>A’ sgrìobhadh litir</i> (‘Writing a letter’)	None	Aspectual particle, Direct Object, Adverbial Mod.

This table summarises the core finding: there is no single category for the verbal noun. Instead, there are VN-constructions, each of which locates the VN at a specific point on a continuum of grammaticality, blending nominal and verbal features to varying degrees to serve diverse communicative functions.

DISCUSSION

The results presented in the previous section offer compelling distributional evidence that the Scottish Gaelic verbal noun is not a member of a discrete lexical category but rather occupies a functional continuum between noun and verb. This finding has significant implications for our understanding of Gaelic grammar, the theoretical conceptualisation of lexical categories, and the nature of the syntax-lexicon interface. This section interprets these findings, situates them within broader linguistic debates, and considers their theoretical consequences.

4.1. Interpretation: Constructional Determination of Categoriality

The central finding of this study is that the categorial properties of the Gaelic VN are not inherent to the lexical item itself but are determined by the syntactic construction in which it is embedded. A VN like *sgrìobhadh* is not intrinsically a noun or a verb; it is a schematic lexical unit that can be ‘coerced’ into behaving like a prototypical noun or verb by the grammatical frame it occupies [29, 50].

When placed in a determiner phrase (an *sgrìobhadh*), the construction activates its nominal potential. When governed by the progressive aspectual particle (*a’ sgrìobhadh*), the construction activates its verbal potential. The hybrid cases, such as the perfective aspect construction (*air a sgrìobhadh*), are the most theoretically revealing. They demonstrate that constructions are not merely assemblages of words but are meaningful grammatical entities in their own right. The perfective construction in Gaelic has evolved to press nominal syntax (a prepositional phrase containing a possessed noun) into the service of a core verbal function (expressing aspect). This supports a

constructionist view where complex grammatical meanings are mapped onto syntactic structures that may be composed of parts with different categorial origins [50].

This analysis stands in contrast to generative approaches that might seek to derive one usage from the other via movement or transformation from a fixed underlying category [cf. 20]. For instance, a strictly nominal analysis [e.g., 93] would struggle to account for the direct object taking and adverbial modification in progressive constructions without positing complex and abstract functional layers. Conversely, a strictly verbal analysis would find it difficult to explain the straightforward nominal behaviour of the VN when it appears with articles and adjectives. A gradient, construction-based model avoids these problems by accepting the surface data at face value: the VN's properties are fluid and context-dependent. Its categoriality is a matter of degree, not an absolute fact.

4.2. Implications for Scottish Gaelic and Celtic Syntax

This study refines our understanding of the synchronic grammar of Scottish Gaelic. By mapping the continuum, we can better appreciate the functional motivations for the existence of different constructions. The language has a range of options for expressing events, each with slightly different syntactic and, arguably, semantic nuances. The choice between the *a'* progressive and the *ri* construction, for instance, is not arbitrary; the former is a fully grammaticalised aspectual marker, while the latter retains a more prepositional, stative flavour ('to be busy with X').

These findings also resonate with analyses of other Celtic languages. The debate over whether the Welsh verbal noun is a verb or a noun [15, 122] is well-known. Our gradient analysis of the Gaelic evidence would suggest that the question itself is flawed. Like its Gaelic counterpart, the Welsh VN exhibits a similar range of behaviours determined by context [7, 44]. The same is true for Irish [51, 84] and Breton [6, 110]. Therefore, grammatical gradience in the verbal noun appears to be a systemic feature of the Celtic language family [101]. This suggests a shared diachronic pathway where an originally nominal form was gradually co-opted for an increasing number of verbal functions, a common process of grammaticalization [60], resulting in the synchronic hybridity we observe today. The historical development of the Indo-European infinitive from nominal origins shows a similar trajectory [37, 38], placing the Celtic situation within a wider cross-linguistic pattern.

Furthermore, this analysis has implications for the typological classification of Gaelic as a VSO (Verb-Subject-Object) language [24]. While finite clauses follow this pattern, the vast majority of verbal expressions in everyday speech are periphrastic constructions built around the VN. In these constructions, the word order is typically Subject-Verb-(Particle)-VN-Object (e.g., *Tha Calum a' sgrìobhadh litir*). The fact that the core lexical 'verb' (the VN) appears after the subject in the most common sentence types challenges a rigid VSO classification and highlights the importance of non-finite structures in determining the overall typological character of a language [cf. 85 on Irish].

4.3. Broader Theoretical Implications: Beyond Aristotle

Beyond Celtic linguistics, this study serves as a clear case study in support of the broader theoretical shift away from discrete, Aristotelian categories towards a more nuanced, gradient view of grammar [1, 30]. The existence of phenomena like the Gaelic VN challenges the notion that lexical categories such as 'noun' and 'verb' are universal, pre-defined primitives of syntactic theory [55, 57]. Instead, it supports the view that such categories are language-specific macroroles that emerge from distributional patterns [28, 59].

The Gaelic data demonstrates that a single lexical item can exhibit properties of two distinct major word classes, and that this variation is systematic and predictable. This supports cognitive models of language where categories have prototypical centres and fuzzy boundaries [68, 71], and where linguistic knowledge is organised around networks of related constructions rather than lists of words and discrete rules. The Gaelic VN is not an exception to a rule; it is an illustration of a more fundamental principle of linguistic organisation.

This has consequences for linguistic description and typology. As Haspelmath [56] argues, imposing pre-established categories from familiar languages onto the language under description can distort the analysis. A faithful

description of Gaelic requires acknowledging that the VN does not fit neatly into the traditional Indo-European part-of-speech system. Instead of asking "Is it a noun or a verb?", the more productive question is "Under what conditions does it behave more like a noun, and under what conditions does it behave more like a verb?". Answering this latter question, as this paper has attempted to do, provides a far richer and more empirically accurate account of the language.

4.4. Limitations and Future Directions

No single study can be exhaustive, and this one is no exception. Our analysis has been primarily qualitative and syntactic, based on established grammars and literature. While this provides a strong foundation, several avenues for future research are apparent.

First, a large-scale quantitative corpus study could verify and refine the proposed continuum. By analysing the frequency of different VN constructions and their co-occurrence with various verbal and nominal diagnostics, it would be possible to add a quantitative dimension to the gradient model, perhaps revealing statistical probabilities of certain behaviours.

Second, a diachronic investigation could trace the historical development of the different VN constructions. This would likely show a gradual 'verb-ward' shift over time, as has been suggested for other infinitival forms [37], providing a historical explanation for the synchronic gradience.

Finally, psycholinguistic research could explore how native Gaelic speakers process these different constructions. Do they mentally categorise the VN differently in different contexts? Reaction time studies or sentence-completion tasks could offer valuable insight into the cognitive reality of the proposed continuum.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to challenge the traditional binary classification of the Scottish Gaelic verbal noun. Through a detailed distributional analysis guided by the principle of grammatical gradience, we have demonstrated that the categorial status of the VN is not fixed but is fluid and context-dependent. The evidence strongly suggests a continuum of syntactic behaviour, ranging from the maximally noun-like function of a derived nominal to the maximally verb-like function within a progressive aspect construction. The various intermediate points on this continuum, exemplified by hybrid structures like the perfective aspect and purposive clauses, reveal a sophisticated grammatical system that leverages nominal syntax for verbal ends.

The central conclusion of this paper is that the question "Is the Gaelic verbal noun a verb or a noun?" is fundamentally flawed. A more accurate and insightful model is one in which the VN is a schematic lexical category whose specific properties are activated by the larger syntactic construction in which it appears. This construction-based, gradient perspective not only provides a more empirically adequate account of the facts of Scottish Gaelic but also aligns with contemporary theoretical movements that emphasise the fuzzy, prototype-based nature of linguistic categories. The Gaelic verbal noun, far from being a problematic exception, thus offers a clear and compelling window into the dynamic and flexible nature of grammar itself.

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