Using Diagramming to Understand Gaelic Verbs

This is a unique approach that I created for examining the inner workings of Gaelic Verbs. You will probably not see it anywhere else.

Let's think about English for a second. If we consider the sentences:

Table 1: English Only Example

Positive Statement	He **is** tired.
Negative Statement	He **is not** tired.
Positive Question	**Is** he tired?
Negative Question	**Isn't** he tired?

we will notice that in the question forms, the word order changes. We also might notice that the word 'not' appears. What does 'not' mean? It doesn't mean anything, other than adding negativity to the verb. So English uses order-change to indicate statement versus question and adds a word to change a verb to a negative.

Gaelic is a verb initial language. This means that we cannot change the order of the words to express anything. The result is that we have four unique forms of the verb to express all the qualities the verb needs to express.

Table 2: English and Gaelic Examples

	Beurla	**Gàidhlig**
Positive Statement	He **is** tired.	**Tha** e sgìth.
Negative Statement	He **is not** tired.	**Chan eil** e sgìth.
Positive Question	**Is** he tired?	**A bheil** e sgìth?
Negative Question	**Isn't** he tired?	**Nach eil** e sgìth?

I have bolded the verb forms in the example sentences. Notice that in Gaelic, all the verb forms are at the beginning of the sentence? **Verb Initial Language**. However, verbs don't just express positive/negative and statement/question. They also express tense and meaning. How do those qualities enter in to the mix?

Let's map out which bits of the verb are conveying what quality, using the following symbols to denote a verb's mandatory qualities:

positive	+	negative	-
statement	.	question	?
tense	T		
meaning	M		

For now, let's just stick with the Gaelic verbs 'to be' - 'Is' and 'Bi.'

Table 3: Diagramming 'Is' and 'Bi' (Present Tense)

	Form	Bi	Is
Positive Statement	Independent Form	+ . T M Tha	+ . T M Is
Negative Statement	Dependent Form	- . T M Chan eil	- . T M Cha(n) ☁
Positive Question	Dependent Form	+ ? T M A bheil	+ ? T M An ☁
Negative Question	Dependent Form	- ? T M Nach eil	- ? T M Nach ☁

Points to notice:
1. The Independent Form of the verb is one word, which expresses all mandatory qualities. In other words, "The Independent Form of the verb is independent of needing any other words."
2. The Dependent Form of the verb DEPENDS on having more than one word.
3. Cha(n), A(n) and Nach are recyclable for every (non-defective) verb in the language.
4. The verbs 'Is' and 'Bi' are the only verbs in Scottish Gaelic to have a simple present tense as Scottish Gaelic has lost the simple present forms for all other verbs.
5. The part of the 'Is' verb which conveys Tense and Meaning isn't written. In order to make 'Is' conform to the same pattern as every other (non-defective) verb in the language, I represent this as the Tense and Meaning are there in spirit - denoted by a cloud symbol. As far as I know, I'm the only one that denotes this this way, and it really helps by taking the peculiarity of Present Tense 'Is' away. 'Is' is the only verb where the recyclable parts (Cha, An, Nach) are present but the actual verb part of the dependent form is missing. In that way, it it is unambiguous as we know which verb we are working with immediately.

You can diagram all regular and irregular verbs in this way - the basic pattern is the same for every verb in every tense. There is a slight nuance in the past tense, where the dependent form of all verbs but a few, pick up an extra word ('do'). That can be explained when the past tense is explored. Hopefully by then all this will be automatic and you won't even have to think about it.

It is important to know the difference between Independent and Dependent forms because when we get to using question words and conjunctions, for example, you will need to know which form to use. No escaping it!

I hope this handout is useful to you and helps you over some of the common verb-hurdles that learners of Gaelic encounter.

Defective Verb: A verb that is missing some or many forms. For example, 'Is' does not have a future tense.