

FROM OLD TO MODERN ICELANDIC: A REAL DICHOTOMY

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Icelandic is standardly seen as a prime example of exceptional historical stability, especially at the morphological level (e.g. Milroy & Milroy 1985, Friðriksson 2008). A similar view is often implicit in historical accounts of (morpho)syntactic phenomena, where more or less the same analysis may be assumed for both Old Norse and Modern Icelandic. Where syntactic differences have been established, morphological changes are dismissed a priori as potential triggers since scholars assume no such changes have taken place. In my view, this treatment is much too superficial and I will show that linguistic developments in both case and argument structure have led to massive diachronic changes in the syntax of Icelandic.

The best known instance is undoubtedly the change from OV to VO, studied extensively, among others by Hróarsdóttir (2000, 2009). She suggests that the loss of OV in Early Modern Icelandic could not have been triggered by morphological factors because the case systems of Old Norse and Icelandic are almost identical. Similarly, there is a general consensus in the literature that the relative order of direct (DO) and indirect objects (IO) in Old Norse was flexible, as exemplified in (1) and (2), and that it essentially followed the same principles as in Modern Icelandic (e.g. Hróarsdóttir 2000).

- (1) Þorgils vaknar ok sagði [Þorsteini vin sínum]_{IO} [**drauminn**]_{DO}.
Thorgils awakens and said Thorstein.N friend.D his.REFL.D dream.DEF.A
'Thorgils wakes up and told his friend Thorstein the dream.' (FLÓ 23; Old Norse)
- (2) Síðan vaknar hann ok segir [**drauminn**]_{DO} [konu sinni]_{IO}.
Then awakens he and tells dream.DEF.A woman.D his.REFL.D
'Then he wakes up and tells the dream to his wife.' (FLÓ 36; Old Norse)

Variable ordering of (in)direct objects is sometimes considered to be an option in Modern Icelandic, given very peculiar constraints on case-assignment, definiteness and animacy of both internal arguments (cf. Thráinsson 2007:98, with references).

In this paper I re-evaluate these standard claims. Based on a corpus study using IcePaHC (Wallenberg et al. 2011), I show that a change did in fact take place from Old Norse to Modern Icelandic such that the frequency of the 'reversed' pattern in (2) as opposed to the 'straight' pattern in (1) dropped significantly. While the frequency of DO>IO in (Early) Old Norse was on a par with what has been reported for Old English (e.g. Allen 2006), it is now almost completely lost. This gradual change in the history of Icelandic preceded the decline of OV by centuries. Interestingly, DO>IO was not replaced with a prepositional dative as reported by McFadden (2002) for English, suggesting an internal account which blocks both movement of DO over IO and the realization of the IO with an overt preposition.

Two suggestions from the literature will be considered, relating to the licensing of dative case and the grammaticalization of a definite determiner. Whereas the canonical view has it that the case system has not changed, Barðdal (2008) points out that the dative case is not only extending to accusative contexts with motion verbs but also to novel verbs such as *publisha* 'to publish' when interpreted as involving caused motion. I take this to mean that the dative can have an underlying *give*-like structure and I show how that sort of analysis provides an explanation for some known peculiarities of Icelandic case-assignment and argument structure. In particular, this explains why DO>IO was possible in Old Norse with any case pattern,

incl. DAT-DAT as shown in (3), whereas only DAT-ACC ditransitives allow DO>IO in Modern Icelandic (with numerous restrictions noted above):

- (3) því að Drottinn hét [vegsemd]_{DO} [vököndum]_{IO}. (DAT-DAT, DO>IO)
 because Lord.DEF promised glory.D awakened.D
 (IcePaHC:1150.HOMILIUBOK.REL-SER.1481)

Various other properties, such as the ban on double objects with verbs of ballistic motion in Icelandic, attested in Old Norse (cf. Barðdal 2008), also follow from this account.

Secondly, I explore the hypothesis due e.g. to Bošković (2009), worked out in great detail by Lander & Haegeman (2014) for Old Norse, that syntactic discontinuity and relatively ‘free’ word order is a feature of NP rather than DP languages. While Lander & Haegeman (2014) argue that (Early) Old Norse was an NP language, I present new evidence for a DP status of Late Old Norse, involving genitive external arguments with an internal argument headed by a preposition (corresponding to *Mary’s purchase of the book*). The first attestations of such configurations coincide with lower frequencies of the ‘reversed’ DO>IO pattern in (2)-(3) above.

Rather than to assume a different value for a DP/NP parameter, I suggest the change represents smaller steps away from a system where information structure (IS) governed both the interpretation (e.g. definite vs. indefinite) and the linearization of arguments. Hróarsdóttir (2009) already argues that OV/VO correlated with given/new information, which suggests that the loss of OV actually *was* triggered by internal factors. To make this more explicit, my claim is the following: The decline of flexible ordering in double object constructions, itself arguably driven by a change from NP to DP status, pushed the evidence for IS-interaction in variable OV/VO grammars below the threshold of what is learnable by speakers, resulting in the loss of OV.

If on the right track, we are in a position to account for a number of seemingly unrelated phenomena on the basis of relatively simple, intuitive factors internal to the faculty of language which are expected to have consequences for the rest of Germanic and beyond.

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