Distinguishing change and stability: a quantitative study of Icelandic oblique subjects

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While there has been a consensus since Andrews (1976) and Thráinsson (1979) that modern Icelandic exhibits oblique subjects in addition to nominative ones, it has remained an open question whether Icelandic has had this property throughout its recorded history. Although Rögnvaldsson (1996) presented compelling evidence in favor of oblique subjects in Old Icelandic (*contra* Faarlund, 2004), and Eythórsson and Barðdal (2005) have argued for their existence from a comparative perspective, the question has remained unresolved due to the lack of definitive subject diagnostics in the historical record. However, with the Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (Wallenberg et al., 2011), the question can now be approached in a quantitative manner for the first time. This study presents data from across the history of Icelandic showing that there has never been any change in the status of oblique subjects. Furthermore, this lack of change indicates that oblique subjects did not arise as a result of the OV-to-VO change in Icelandic. Instead, it is more likely that oblique subjects were innovated as a result of the change in the structure of the Icelandic TP, which occurred earlier in the history of the language.

We present three quantitative experiments comparing hypothesized oblique subjects to known nominative subjects over time, all of which show that hyp. oblique subjects pattern like subjects across the history of Icelandic. First, because Icelandic is a symmetrical V2 language (Thráinsson, 1986) permitting embedded topicalization (Thráinsson, 2007), the position preceding the finite verb can contain either the subject or a fronted constituent, even in subordinate clauses. However, extraction out of a given clause causes embedded topicalization to be either degraded or ruled out entirely (ex. (1)–(2)). In clauses which disallow topicalization, the initial constituent must be the grammatical subject (ex. (3)). We calculated the frequency of sub. clauses containing both an extraction and a clause-initial hyp. oblique subject, and compared it to the frequency of such clauses where a nominative subject appears initially. If the obliques had become subjects over time, then we would expect a rise in the frequency of gap-containing clauses with initial obliques. Instead, clauses with initial obliques and clauses with initial nominative subjects behave nearly identically over time (Figure 1), indicating that the grammatical status of these obliques never changed.

The second experiment concerns the position of subjects when they follow the finite verb, e.g. after topicalization and V2. The default position for subjects in this context is immediately following the finite verb. We compared the frequency of hyp. oblique subjects in this position compared with nominative subjects over time. Again, if the obliques had gained subject properties over time, we would expect a increase in the frequency of the oblique arguments in this position compared with the nominatives. There was no such increase, and both nominative and hyp. oblique subjects showed a stable preference over time to immediately follow the finite verb under subject-verb inversion.

Finally, we looked at conjunction reduction; in many contexts, only the grammatical subject of a clause can be omitted under identity with the subject of the preceding clause (ex. (4)). If hyp. oblique subjects had gained subject properties over the history of Icelandic, then we would expect to see an increase in the number of conjunction-reduced obliques compared with the frequency of reduced nominative subjects over the same period. There is no such increase. If anything, the rate of oblique reduction changes less over time than that of nominative reduction. To verify, applying a loglinear model which assumes no interaction between the case of the reduced subject and the time period yields a very good fit to the data ($G^2 = 1.19$ on 2 df, $p = 0.55$).

All three quantitative experiments point to the conclusion that the oblique subjects of modern Icelandic have consistently been grammatical subjects throughout the period 1100-1900. This clear result means that the OV-to-VO change in the vP, which was in progress during this period, could not have caused the innovation of oblique subjects. If oblique subjects were innovated in North Germanic at all, the likely cause was the change in the headedness of TP, which went to completion earlier. We suggest that the catalyst was this change in the position of Tense, which triggered a reanalysis by learners concerning which features the EPP probes for.

(1) Ég spurði hvað hún gaf Jóni
I asked what.ACC she.NOM gave John.DAT
'I asked what she gave to John'

(2) *Ég spurði hvað Jóni gaf hún

(3) Ég spurði hvað Jóni var gefið
I asked what.NOM John.DAT was given
'I asked what John was given'

(4) Jón las bókina og (honum) fannst hún góð
John read book.the and (him.DAT) found she.NOM good.NOM
'John read the book and (he) found it good'

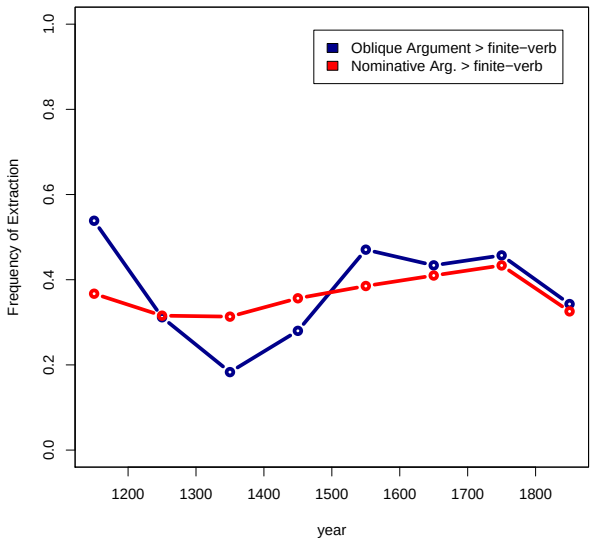

FIGURE 1. Extraction in Subject/Oblique-initial Subordinate Clauses

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