

Alive despite all odds: Oblique subjects in the history of Icelandic

Diachronic studies on oblique subjects have concentrated on showing that such phenomena represent an archaic layer in the languages they occur in (Barðdal et al. 2020, Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005, Bauer 2000). For example, the case marking of the verb ‘hunger’, taking an oblique subject in all old and archaic Germanic languages (Icel. *hungra*, and its cognates, e.g. Germ. *hungern*, and Old English and Gothic *hungrian*, with an accusative), has been considered of Common Germanic origin (Barðdal & Eythórsson 2012). Nevertheless, it is known that predicate-specific oblique subjects have emerged at different times in various languages (e.g. Pooth et al. 2019). This is noteworthy given the strong tendency to eliminate oblique subjects, due to changes such as Nominative Substitution and lexical replacement of the relevant predicates (e.g. Eythórsson 2002). In this paper, we focus on how new oblique subjects arise. In particular, we investigate three processes whereby oblique subjects have emerged in the history of Icelandic. These are *Oblique-Case Substitution* (OCS), *Case-Preserving Anticausativization* (CPA) and *Argument Swapping* (ARS). Careful analysis of relevant examples shows that they have emerged as a consequence of productive processes in the history of Icelandic.

OCS involves generalization (“morphosyntactic leveling”) of a particular case pattern with verbs of a certain lexical-semantic class, especially experiencer predicates (e.g. Jónsson & Eythórsson 2005). This change goes against the main trend in case changes in Icelandic in that it causes nominative experiencer subjects to be replaced by oblique ones. Recent examples of OCS are attested in Modern Icelandic. Thus, *hlakka til* ‘look forward to’, originally taking a nominative subject, has become widespread with an oblique subject (either accusative or dative) since the early 20th century. While OCS is predicate-specific, targeting only a handful of experiencer verbs, the remaining two changes are more general and represent active processes. CPA (termed Oblique Anticausativization by Barðdal et al. 2020) is a special case of anticausativization, where the external argument of a transitive structure is removed and an internal argument is promoted to subject. Interestingly, the subject of the anticausative variant preserves the oblique case of the object of the transitive (Cennamo et al. 2015, Barðdal et al. 2020; for a different analysis, see Sigurðsson 2005, Schäfer 2008). According to Barðdal et al. (2020), semantic connections between the transitive and anticausative variants are “synchronically opaque” in Modern Icelandic. We argue against this view, claiming that the connection must still be transparent as new instances of CPA would otherwise not be expected. Our evidence includes examples that fit the pattern of case-preservation in anticausativization (CPA), e.g. the intransitive verb *ffölga* ‘increase’ with a dative subject (1b) rather than an earlier nominative (1a).

(1) a. Fuglarnir fjölguðu. (OldIcel.) b. Fuglunum fjölgaði. (ModIcel.)

birds-the.NOM increased birds-the.DAT increased ‘The birds increased in number.’

The change from nominative to dative in (1) hinges on a previous change in the case pattern of the transitive variant of this verb. In Old Icelandic, the transitive *ffölga* took a nominative subject and an accusative object. In early Modern Icelandic, the object of *ffölga* started appearing in the

dative case. We can show that only after the emergence of the dative object, the intransitive variant with a dative subject arose. These facts strongly indicate that the relationship between the transitive and the intransitive variants was still transparent at the time of the change. Note that CPA is different from OCS which does not involve a relationship of this kind. Moreover, OCS only targets experiencer predicates whereas CPA does not (cf. *ffölga* ‘increase’ with a theme subject).

Finally, ARS involves a reanalysis of an object as a subject (in early Old Icelandic). Our arguments are primarily based on the historical development of *-st* predicates (the so-called “middle”, cf. Ottosson 1992, 2008, Wood 2014). On our account, the oblique subject in a dative–nominative structure like (2) arose through ARS from an earlier nominative–dative structure.

(2) *Mér tókst þetta.* (Old/ModIcel.)

me.DAT succeeded this.NOM ‘I succeeded in this.’

The *-st* (OldIcel. *-sk*) developed historically from a reflexive pronoun which had been reanalyzed as a suffix already in early Old Icelandic (Ottosson 1992, 2008). The reflexive was bound by the subject of the verb, which must originally have been the nominative NP (e.g. *þetta* ‘this’) rather than the dative (e.g. *mér* ‘me’). We propose that since the dative was almost always animate, it was typically fronted to clause-initial position, enabling its reanalysis as a subject (e.g. Haspelmath 2001).

A parallel development arguably took place with so-called alternating (nominative–dative/dative–nominative) predicates where the first argument in the argument structure of the kind shown in (3) is always subject and the second one is object (Bernóðsson 1982, Thráinsson 2007, Barðdal et al. 2019). On this account the pattern in (3a) is historically older than the pattern in (3b).

(3) a. *Þetta (subj.) hefur hentað mér (obj.).* b. *Mér (subj.) hefur hentað þetta (obj.).* (ModIcel.)

this.NOM has suited me.DAT me.DAT has suited this.NOM ‘This has suited me.’

In a number of cases, however, there has been a further change fixing the animate oblique NP as a subject. As a result, the oblique always occurs first in the argument structure, whereas the nominative cannot occur in this position. This is the case with “pure” dative–nominative verbs like *líka* ‘like’ (4).

(4) a. **Þetta (subj.) hefur líkað mér (obj.).* b. *Mér (subj.) hefur líkað þetta (obj.).* (ModIcel.)

this.NOM has liked me.DAT me.DAT has liked this.NOM ‘I have liked this.’

Crucially, comparative evidence from other Germanic languages (Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005) supports this analysis, suggesting that the alternating type (3) represents an older stage in the historical development than the “pure” dative–nominative predicates (4b).

To summarize, despite a strong tendency to generalize nominative as a subject case, oblique subjects have emerged throughout the history of Icelandic. The novel contribution of this paper is spelling out the precise mechanisms of how such changes come about. Not only can we show how new oblique subjects have arisen, but we also pinpoint the exact conditions on their emergence.