

Word order change, case and expletives in the history of Icelandic

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Crosslinguistically, languages tend to mark grammatical relations via case, word order or agreement (cf. Kiparsky 1988). Icelandic is known to have both relatively fixed word order and rich case morphology with complex agreement patterns (see Thráinsson 2007) and thus constitutes an interesting object of study in this respect. This paper focuses on the marking of subjects in Icelandic and presents results from ongoing corpus investigations using the Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC, Wallenberg et al. 2011), combined with novel visualization techniques. Our research documents that a change in the realization of dative arguments goes hand in hand with an independent development which sees a reduction in V1 clauses and a preference to realize the subject clause-initially.

Icelandic is standardly assumed to be an SVO-language exhibiting the V2 constraint (e.g. Thráinsson 2007). Nevertheless, Icelandic allows V1 in matrix declaratives. According to Sigurðsson (1990), V1 structures appear throughout the history of Icelandic and are still common in the present-day language. Butt et al. (2014) present a study of V1 matrix declaratives in IcePaHC and confirm that V1 constructions are found in all attested stages of Icelandic, but show a marked decrease post-1900. One explanation for the decrease in V1 post-1900 would be a simultaneous increase in the overt expletive subject *það* (Franco 2008; see Axel 2007 for a similar claim for historical German), rendering some of the old V1 constructions (e.g. (1)) into V2 sentences. However, this cannot fully account for the decrease in V1 as the V1 constructions in Butt et al. (2014) were not solely confined to clauses with ‘null’ expletives in the older texts.

(1) _____ Var fátt manna heima.
ØEXPL was few men.GEN at-home

‘There were few men at home.’(1350.FINNBOGL.NAR-SAG,655.1696)

Schätzle et al. (2015) investigate the diachrony of dative subjects in IcePaHC. They show that while dative subjects generally appear throughout the history of Icelandic, their distribution has changed significantly over time (contra e.g. Barðdal & Eythórsson 2009). Specifically, an increase in the frequency of dative subjects was found, resulting from an increasingly systematic association of dative case with experiencers and goals, and driven by a striking rise of dative subjects with verbs carrying middle morphology in the data. Again, the observed changes peak around 1900.

We examined the interaction between V1 constructions, subject position, dative subjects and overt expletive subjects in matrix declaratives in IcePaHC:

Table 1: V1 constructions, subject position, dative subjects and expletives in IcePaHC

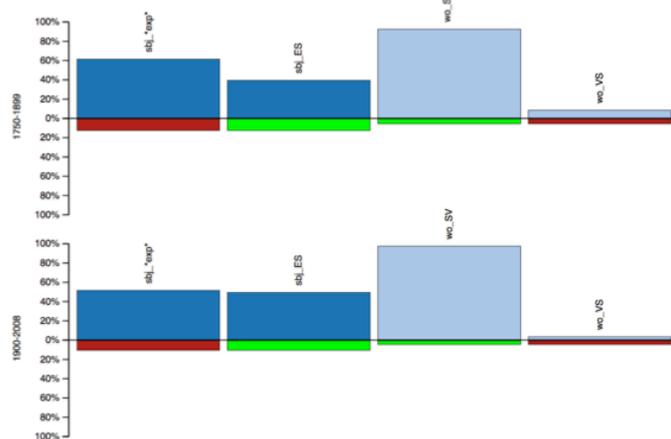
Time period	V1	Prefinite subjects (overall)	Prefinite dative subjects	Overt expletive subjects ¹	Prefinite overt expletive subjects
1150-1350	9%	52%	25%	11%	83%
1351-1550	9%	55%	20%	19%	83%
1550-1750	9%	54%	29%	24%	77%
1750-1900	11%	57%	35%	43%	92%
1900-2008	2%	73%	56%	84%	99%
Average (all time periods)	8%	58%	34%	34%	93%

With respect to V1, we do indeed find that when compared to all non-V1 matrix declarative sentences, the decrease in V1 as of 1900 is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This contrasts starkly with the relative stability of V1 throughout previous periods. Interestingly, comparing the data for prefinite subjects, our results show that the preference for dative subjects to occur in the prefinite position is weaker than that shown for all types of subject overall. The data for all

¹ Excluding expletives in extraposition constructions, where overt *það* was already very frequent in Old Icelandic and remains relatively stable across all periods.

subject types and for dative subjects alike, however, shows an increasing preference for subjects to occur in the prefinite position post-1900, leading us to draw the hypothesis that subjecthood was increasingly marked by word order at this time.

Regarding the connection between V1 and expletive subjects, the decrease in V1 does appear to coincide with a dramatic increase in overt expletive subjects post-1900. Moreover, a closer look at the structural position in which the overt expletive subjects occur reveals that pre-1900, expletive *það* is not exclusively restricted to the prefinite position, but post-1900 the prefinite positional constraint consistently applies. Motivated by the increasingly strong association of the prefinite position as a subject position, the prefinite position is now the only position available to the expletive. On the left, our novel visualization system displays the occurrences of overt (ES) and empty expletive (*exp*) subjects in either SV (Subject-Verb) or VS word order in the latest two time stages. The visualization predicts that while overt expletives are increasing (green bars; red indicates a decrease) post-1900, the prefinite subject position is also more strongly preferred.



The conclusions our data allows us to draw about this historical stage of Icelandic are as follows: over time, subjecthood becomes increasingly associated with a particular structural position (clause-initial). This fixing of a structural position for subjecthood coincides with and likely motivates an increase in overt expletive subjects as a way of filling this position, which in turn could explain the observed decrease in V1 constructions.

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