

Weather *pro*(s) and cons

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In this paper we present independent evidence for a null external argument (“weather *pro*”) in Icelandic. Our results are in line with the analysis of Schäfer (2008, 2012) and Wood (2016), who posit a null argument in fate accusative constructions (FAs). While the arguments put forward by these scholars are predominantly theoretical, our examination of the diachronic evidence of weather verbs in Icelandic reveals that there is a considerable empirical substance to their claims.

The assumption of weather *pro* has been used to explain the case marking and semantic interpretation of FAs in Icelandic (Schäfer 2008, 2012, Wood 2016). By hypothesis, the accusative of the subject in FAs is dependent on weather *pro* first receiving nominative case (for dependent case, see also Marantz 1991). Weather *pro* is considered to be a thematic argument of the verb, with a defective set of phi-features, and have the syntax of a clitic and the semantics of a weather pronoun.

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|-----|----|----------------------------|--------|--------------|--------------|----|------------------------|---------|------|
| (1) | a. | Einhver | fyllti | bátinn. | (Transitive) | b. | Bátinn | fyllti. | (FA) |
| | | someone | filled | boat-the.ACC | | | boat-the.ACC | filled | |
| | | ‘Someone filled the boat.’ | | | | | ‘The boat got filled.’ | | |

Wood (2016) suggests that the overt element *hann* in Icelandic, which occurs in weather expressions in certain registers (dialects) and is homonymous with the third person masculine pronoun *hann* ‘he’, is a certain type of weather pronoun (2). This analysis is in fact comparable to Schäfer’s (2008:296) account of weather-*es* in German and its connection to fate semantics, i.e. the semantics of an event occurring spontaneously without any visible agent being involved. (The usual expletive element *það* in Icelandic only occurs clause-initially and does not participate in subject-verb inversion; it will not be discussed further here.)

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|-----|----|-----------------------|--------|--------|----|-------|-----------------------|---------------|--|
| (2) | a. | Hann | rignir | í dag. | b. | Í dag | rignir | hann . | |
| | | he | rains | today | | today | rains | he | |
| | | ‘It’s raining today.’ | | | | | ‘Today it’s raining.’ | | |

There are two problems with this analysis for Icelandic. First, the arguments put forth so far in favour of weather *pro* are based on “absence of evidence” to the contrary. Second, referring to arguments of weather verbs does not by itself add credibility to the assumption of weather *pro* since weather verbs in Icelandic have standardly been considered “no-argument predicates” (e.g. Thráinsson 2007).

However, there is in fact independent evidence which supports the assumption of weather *pro* in Icelandic. This evidence is both synchronic and diachronic. We argue, contrary to e.g. Thráinsson (2007), that weather verbs do indeed occur with an argument in Icelandic: either a fully referential NP or a non-referential quasi-argument, which can be covert or overt. This quasi-argument corresponds to weather *pro* and weather-*hann*. Unlike Schäfer and Wood, our argumentation does not depend on the case marking and semantic reading of FAs, but on the syntactic behaviour of weather verbs in control clauses (*pro*-infinitives) and conjunction reduction in Modern Icelandic, as well as on the diachronic development of weather-*hann* in Older Icelandic.

The fact that weather verbs can occur in control clauses, as in (3), strongly suggests that they must occur with a (quasi-)argument (cf. Chomsky (1981:323–325) for a similar argument for expletive *it* in English being a quasi-argument).

- (3) Í gær hafði hvesst án þess að ___ hafa rignt.
 yesterday had gotten-windier without have rained
 ‘Yesterday it had gotten windy without raining.’

Conjunction Reduction (CR) also indicates that there is an unexpressed (quasi-)argument with weather verbs. In such cases we propose that there is an omitted argument in the second conjunct which is co-referential with an argument in the first clause. Crucially, this argument can be overtly expressed as weather *hann*, as shown in (4).

- (4) Þá hafði oft rignt en (**hann**) hafði þó aldrei snjóað.
 then had often rained but he had though never snowed
 ‘Then it had often rained although it had never snowed.’

The overt quasi-argument weather *hann* behaves syntactically like a subject argument; not only can it occur optionally in structures such as (4) but it also takes part in subject-verb inversion (2). Diachronically, the origins of weather *hann* can be linked to the use of NPs with weather verbs (5a). Weather *hann* first appeared in the 17th–18th centuries with weather verbs which could take an overt masculine NP. On our analysis, *hann* was originally a referential pronoun and was later reanalyzed as a quasi-argument (5b). Since quasi-arguments do not have to be overtly expressed in Modern Icelandic (Sigurðsson 1993), weather *hann* is regularly not present (5c). In both cases the element in question is to be analyzed as an underspecified agent, just as has been done with weather *pro* in FAs. (Notice that the weather expressions in (5) all have the same meaning ‘Now it’s windy’.)

- (5) a. Nú blæs **vindurinn**. b. Nú blæs **hann**. c. Nú blæs.
 now blows wind-the.NOM now blows he now blows

Thus, we conclude that the parallels between FAs and weather verbs suggested by Schäfer and Wood are highly significant and in fact more extensive than they claimed.

In summary, our research on weather verbs in Icelandic supports the existence of weather *pro*. Moreover, this result is in accordance with such an analysis for FAs (Schäfer 2008, 2012, Wood 2016). Contrary to previous accounts, our approach is based on empirical evidence which is both synchronic and diachronic. Thus, our study adds a missing piece to the overall picture of weather *pro* in Icelandic.

References

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