

# OBLIQUE SUBJECTS AND DATIVE APPLICATIVES IN NORTH GERMANIC: RECONCILING TWO EXTREMES

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In this paper I argue for the existence of high applicatives in Old Norse, spelled out as dative case as seen in (1)-(2), and subsequent loss thereof in the history of Icelandic based on novel empirical data. I also provide new quantitative evidence for a related change from ‘flexible’ topic-prominent argument licensing in Old Norse to the ‘rigid’ subject vs. object system of Modern Icelandic, based on a corpus study on (the loss of) scrambling ‘across arguments’, as seen in (3). If formulated as a parameter, a negative value for topic prominence will result in a reanalysis of high applicatives with topic status as belonging to the argument structure, lexically selected by the verb. This is due to a bias on the part of the learner of a subject-prominent system towards interpreting elements preceding the finite verb as subjects, ultimately giving rise to generalised oblique subjects. The fundamental claims to be defended are that dative case in Old Norse was not restricted to lexical case-marking and that word order was driven by information structure, differing qualitatively in these respects from Modern Icelandic.

Regarding the first claim, two opposing views can be discerned in the literature on the status of oblique subjects in Old Norse, which occupy extremes at the two ends of a continuum: Old Norse either lacked oblique subjects entirely, being an innovation in Icelandic (e.g. Faarlund 2001), or Old Norse and Modern Icelandic can be analysed in more or less the same way, with mere quantitative differences at the lexical level (e.g. Barðdal and Eythórsson 2005, Wallenberg et al. 2011). To do justice to the synchronic and diachronic variation attested, a different, more nuanced approach is needed.

For Old Norse, Viðarsson (2009) has suggested that a subset of DAT-NOM predicates, often taken to involve oblique subjects, were, in fact, ‘free’ benefactives which do not straightforwardly fit into the subject vs. object dichotomy. Example (1) is a case in point:

- (1) Hvort reiðið þér svo slæga sverðin er eg sé að ekki bíta yður? (HKR-449)  
whether swing you so poorly swords-the.A as I see that not bite you.D  
‘Do you swing the swords so poorly, because I see (they) do not cut (it) for you?’ (ON)

Some such ‘exceptions’ have been discussed in the literature under the heading of alternating verbs (e.g. Barðdal & Eythórsson 2005). Although that analysis may account for certain specific cases, I argue that such an account is not always tenable. If these datives are not to be analysed as arguments of the lexical heads in question, e.g. *bíta* ‘bite’ in (1), they are also expected to occur in environments where no lexically-determined thematic role is available. This prediction is, indeed, borne out, as witnessed by (2):

- (2) veittu mer þat, at þu<sub>i</sub> sker mer<sub>j</sub> skyrtnu, Audr<sub>i</sub>, Þorkeli bonnda minum<sub>k</sub> (GISL-11)  
give me it that you cut me.D shirt.A Audur Thorkel.D husband mine.D  
‘Audur, please be so kind to cut a shirt for my husband Thorkel for me’ (ON)

A ditransitive verb, e.g. *skera* ‘cut’ in (2), by definition has at most two internal arguments. A third element like *mer* ‘me’ in (2), therefore, cannot be a part of the argument structure of the verb. Furthermore, previous research into applicatives has shown that applicatives of the *same type* also cannot accumulate (cf. Boneh and Nash 2009). As a result, the boldfaced elements in (2) must be analysed as a (non-selected) high applicative and a selected benefactive (internal argument or low applicative), respectively. Examples of this type have not been discussed before and will be regarded as crucial evidence in favour of the present approach. Arguably identical examples involving reflexives are known from the literature. However, these have largely been ignored by scholars working on Old Norse and either explained away

as being incomplete (Haugan 2000) or considered to be due to a non-argumental status of reflexives (Maling 2003), which is mistaken in my view.

In contrast, corresponding datives as above are in Modern Icelandic either licensed by virtue of being a part of the verb's argument structure (raising to subject) or require prepositional spell-out. I provide an explanation for this peculiar historical development in terms of a parameter change from a topic-prominent to a subject-prominent system. Hróarsdóttir (2008) has already demonstrated that the licensing of internal arguments in Old Norse, a variable OV/VO system, made reference to or was driven by information structure (IS). The IS-driven system was stable in terms of variable OV orders until the 17th century, when they were gradually replaced by VO orders.

I present additional quantitative evidence in favour of the claim that topic prominence gave way to subject prominence around the 17th century. Based on a corpus study using IcePaHC (Wallenberg et al. 2011), I show that the loss of IS-driven OV orders mirrors closely that of the availability of scrambling 'across arguments', i.e. variable linearisation of themes and recipients. My diachronic corpus-based findings also corroborate Dehé's (2004) study of Modern Icelandic, based on a judgment task, which indicated that speakers reject scrambled *theme-recipient* orders, as in (3b):

- (3) a. Jón færði *konunni* **blómið**  
John gave woman-the.D flower-the.A  
'John gave the woman the flower' (ModIc.)
- b. ?\* Jón færði **blómið** *konunni*  
John gave flower-the.A woman-the.D  
'John gave the flower (to) the woman' (ModIc.)

New quantitative results indicate that scrambling across arguments drops noticeably, from a frequency of over 40% in the 16th century to less than 15% in the 17th century, and never recovers. Once scrambling is lost and information structure plays only a minor role in the system, its acquirers are forced to either develop new idiosyncratic categories to match the input or to extend those that are already in place.

The picture sketched here differs considerably from previous approaches and has wide implications for the historical status of oblique subjects and development of dative case in Icelandic. I argue that Old Norse differs qualitatively rather than quantitatively from Modern Icelandic in important respects, viz. regarding argument licensing (topic vs. subject prominence) and the morphological make-up of applicatives. The synchronic level as well as the attested diachronic developments are accounted for if overtly case-marked applicatives fuse with (existing) oblique subjects, as a result of changes in topic/subject-prominence parameter settings. However, this is implausible unless oblique subjects already existed in Old Norse.

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