

## Case in Icelandic

This assignment investigates the implications of certain facts in Icelandic for our assumptions about the nature of several grammatical principles. The basic syntactic properties of Icelandic are familiar in general terms, but the language has a quirky characteristic that interacts in an interesting way with its otherwise familiar features.

### Background

Icelandic has a number of characteristics that differentiate it from other Scandinavian languages, two of which are relevant to the current assignment:

1. It has preserved a full system of agreement inflection for verbs.
2. It has preserved a full set of morphological case distinctions in its nominal system, distinguishing among nominative, accusative, genitive, and dative.

The sentences in (1)-(6) illustrate these properties of the language, and also illustrate some of its basic (and familiar) movement constructions. To simplify things, I have indicated only the case and agreement information that is relevant to the assignment.<sup>1</sup>

- (1) Við        kusum        stelpuna.  
we-NOM elected-1PL the-girl-ACC  
'We elected the girl.'
- (2) Stelpan        var        kosin.  
the-girl-NOM was-3SG elected-NOM-SG-FEM  
'The girl was elected.'
- (3) Þið                stækkuðuð    garðana.  
you-NOM-PL enlarged-2PL the-gardens-ACC  
'You enlarged the gardens.'
- (4) Garðarnir        stækkuðu.  
the-gardens-NOM enlarged-3PL  
'The gardens enlarged.'
- (5) Þær                eru        kaldar.  
they-NOM-PL-FEM are-3PL cold-NOM-PL-FEM  
'They are cold.'

---

<sup>1</sup>A note on orthography: þ is a voiceless interdental fricative, and ð is its voiced counterpart.

- (6) þær virðast hafa verið kosnar.  
 they-NOM-PL-FEM seem-3PL have been elected-NOM-PL-FEM  
 ‘They seem to have been elected.’

In passives in Icelandic, an expletive element *það* can appear in subject position while the underlying direct object NP remains inside the VP:

- (7) það voru lesnar fjórar bækur.  
 EXPL were read-NOM-PL four-NOM-PL books-NOM-PL  
 ‘Four books were read.’

## Part A

An important feature of Icelandic is that the complements of certain verbs are associated with specific types of case morphology; this kind of verb-dependent case is often referred to as ‘inherent case’. Some crucial facts are illustrated by (8)-(9). In (8), the verbs *hjálpuðum/björguðum/heilsuðum* must occur with objects in dative case, and in (9), the verbs *söknuðum/leituðum/gættum* occur with objects in genitive case.

- (8) Við hjálpuðum/björguðum/heilsuðum stelpunum.  
 we-NOM helped/rescued/greeted-1PL the-girls-DAT-PL  
 ‘We helped/rescued/greeted the girls.’
- (9) Við söknuðum/leituðum/gættum hennar.  
 we-NOM missed/searched-for/looked-after-1PL her-GEN  
 ‘We missed/searched for/looked after her.’

Taking as a starting point the assumption that our claims about nominative and accusative case in English carry over to Icelandic, how can we account for patterns of inherent case assignment in examples like (8) and (9)?

## Part B

Now consider the passive sentences in (10)-(12).

- (10) Henni var hjálpað/bjargað/heilsað.  
 her-DAT was helped/rescued/greeted.  
 ‘She was helped/rescued/greeted.’
- (11) Hennar var söknuðum/leituðum/gættum.  
 her-GEN was missed/searched-for/looked-after  
 ‘She was missed/searched for/looked after.’
- (12) Þeim virðist hafa verið hjálpað.  
 them-DAT seems have been helped  
 ‘They seem to have been helped.’

Passives with expletive subjects display the pattern in (13)-(14).

- (13) það hafði verið stolið einum stól.  
EXPL had been stolen one-DAT chair-DAT  
'One chair had been stolen.'
- (14) það var skilað fjórum bókum.  
EXPL was returned four-DAT-PL books-DAT-PL  
'Four books were returned.'

To what extent are the properties of Icelandic as laid out so far in accord with our expectations, given the set of theoretical assumptions we have developed over the course of the quarter?

What adjustments (language-specific or general), if any, would have to be made to our set of assumptions in order to accommodate the observations made so far?

### Part C

One of the most celebrated syntactic properties of Icelandic is that it also permits inherently case-marked NPs to occur in subject position. (These are often called 'quirky case-marked subjects' or 'quirky subjects'.)

- (15) Okkur vantaði vinnu.  
us-ACC lacked/needed a-job.  
'We lacked/needed a job.'
- (16) Henni bataði.  
her-DAT recovered.  
'She recovered.'
- (17) Henni áskotnaðist miklir peningar.  
her-DAT luck-onto much money.  
'She had the good fortune to get a lot of money.'
- (18) Henni mistókst allar tilraunirnar.  
her-DAT failed all the-attempts  
'All her efforts failed.'
- (19) Henni skruppu fætur.  
her-DAT failed feet.  
'She stumbled.'
- (20) Henni leiddust strákarirnir.  
her-DAT bored the-boys  
'She found the boys boring.'

- (21) Henni líkudu ekki þessar athugasemdir  
 her-DAT liked neg these comments  
 ‘She did not like these comments.’
- (22) Hana þyrstir.  
 her-ACC thirsts.  
 ‘She is thirsty.’
- (23) Henni var óglatt.  
 her-DAT was nauseous.  
 ‘She felt nauseous.’
- (24) Strákunum hafði verið kalt.  
 the-boys-DAT-PL had been cold.  
 ‘The boys felt cold.’
- (25) Henni ógnar hætan.  
 her-DAT terrifies the-danger  
 ‘The danger terrifies her.’
- (26) Hana hryllir við ættuni.  
 her-ACC is-horrified by the-danger  
 ‘The danger horrifies her.’

Assume that the examples in (15)-(26) are representative of the class of predicates that allow quirky case-marked subjects. (This is true.) Assume also that the clause-initial NPs in these examples are actual subjects (i.e., in SpecTP), not fronted topics or the like. (This is also well-established.) On the basis of these assumptions, consider the following questions:

1. It has traditionally been assumed that inherent case can be assigned only to expressions selected by V (internal arguments), never to external arguments (subjects). When the Icelandic data above was first discussed, it was presented as an argument against this view. Is this a sound interpretation of the data? Say clearly why or why not.
2. Do the facts above fall in line with theoretical expectation, given our set of assumptions? If not, say why not, and also say what kinds of adjustments would have to be made to our assumptions in order to accommodate these facts.

## Part D

In this final section we will take a closer look at some important facts which have so far been presented without comment. These facts have to do with the interaction between case and agreement. Contrast (27) with (28), paying special attention to the agreement on the finite (auxiliary) verb.

(27) Bækurnar voru lesnar.  
the-books-NOM-PL were-3PL read  
'The books were read.'

(28) Bókunum var skilað.  
the-books-DAT-PL was-3SG returned.  
'The books were returned.'

In passives with expletive subjects, we see exactly the same sorts of facts:

(29) Það voru lesnar fjórar bækur.  
EXPL were-3PL read four-NOM-PL books-NOM-PL  
'Four books were read.'

(30) Það var skilað fjórum bókum.  
EXPL was-3SG returned four-DAT-PL books-DAT-PL  
'Four books were returned.'

The finite auxiliary verb in (28) and (30) appears in a 'default' 3rd person singular form. A similar contrast can be seen in (31)-(32) (note that even the 1pl dative subject in (32) gets 3sg agreement), and in the raising constructions in (33)-(34)

(31) Við lásum bókina.  
we-NOM-1PL read-1PL the-book.  
'We read the book.'

(32) Okkur vantaði bókina.  
us-DAT-PL lacked-3SG the-book  
'We lacked/needed the book.'

(33) Einhverjir bátar voru talðir hafa verið keyptir.  
some-NOM-PL boats-NOM-PL were-3PL believed have been bought  
'Some boats were believed to have been bought.'

(34) Þeim virðist hafa verið hjálpað.  
them-DAT-PL seems-3SG have been helped  
'They seem to have been helped.'

**Your final task** To the extent that you can, try to integrate these observations into the understanding you have built up so far of how the Icelandic system works, and discuss on the implications of these facts for our broader set of assumptions about the factors driving syntactic derivations. If you feel that these facts are indicative of an important distinction between the syntax of Icelandic and English (beyond the superficial difference in case morphology), be sure to comment on this. Be as explicit as possible, providing lexical entries, trees and derivations as appropriate.