

The Status of Morphological Case in the Icelandic Lexicon

1. Introduction

In this paper, I am going to discuss the role and status of morphological case in Icelandic. This is only a preliminary presentation of a part of a work in progress, so the readers should not expect any definite results. However, I think it is clear that the question asked here are certainly worth asking, and in the end, we will hopefully be able to answer some of them.

2. Case Assignment Features in Lexical Entries of Verbs?

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One of the many questions that a theory of the lexicon must try to answer is this: What is included in the lexical entries of individual words? We know that there must be phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic information; but exactly which features do we need to have in the lexical entry, and which features are predictable on the basis of something else?

In studies of the Icelandic lexicon, the status of morphological case is a very intriguing question. What I want to find out is: Do we have to specify morphological case in the lexical entry of verbs; or is it predictable from other features, such as thematic roles, syntactic function, etc.?

As is well known, Icelandic has retained four distinct morphological cases, not only in pronouns, but also in nouns and adjectives. This is one of the main features that distinguish Icelandic from the mainland Scandinavian languages. In (1) we see that direct objects can have accusative case, like in (1a); dative case, like in (1b); and genitive case, like in (1c).

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|-----|----|----|--------|------------|---------------------------|
| (1) | a. | Ég | sé | hann (A). | (cf. Da. Jeg ser ham) |
| | | I | see | him | |
| | b. | Ég | hjálpa | honum (D). | (cf. Da. Jeg hjælper ham) |
| | | I | help | him | |

- c. Ég sakna hans (G). (cf. Da. Jeg savner ham)
 I miss him

In the mainland Scandinavian languages we find etymologically the same verbs, but there is no morphological distinction between the objects they take.

As is well known, linguists have often tried to relate various syntactic changes in the mainland Scandinavian languages to their loss of morphological case and verb agreement (cf. especially various works by Christer Platzack and Anders Holmberg). Icelandic, however, has retained four distinct morphological cases and verb agreement, and consequently, these syntactic changes have not occurred there. The loss of morphological case is also claimed to have caused some syntactic changes in the history of English (cf., for instance, van Kemenade 1987).

I see no reason to doubt that there is an intimate connection between the loss of morphological case and syntactic changes. However, this does not answer the question why Icelandic has retained morphological case. Why didn't Icelandic get rid of morphological case, like the mainland Scandinavian languages?

It is tempting to think that the reason for retaining morphological case is that it serves some function, such that some distinction would be lost if morphological case were eliminated. But what kind of function could this be? Two possibilities come to mind; those that are mentioned in (2) below:

- (2) *Possible functions of morphological case:*
- a. Syntactic role (e.g., licensing of NPs)
 - b. Semantic role (e.g., expression of certain thematic roles)

2.1 Syntactic Function

Intuitively, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that morphological case serves some syntactic function; for instance, it might enable the language to make use of various word order patterns not possible in the mainland Scandinavian languages.

Another possibility is that morphological case is somehow semantically governed, most likely through thematic roles, such that a certain morphological case has the function of expressing a certain thematic role. In the following, I will discuss both these possibilities.

Trivially, it is certainly true that morphological case makes it easier for Icelandic to use certain movement rules unambiguously. This is shown in (3); in Icelandic, there is no doubt whatsoever as to who bit whom, even though the object is topicalized and the subject appears post-verbally, as in (3b).

- (3) a. Hundurinn beit manninn (cf. Da. Hunden bed manden)
 the dog (N) bit the man (A)
 `The dog bit the man'
- b. Manninn beit hundurinn (cf. Da. Manden bed hunden)
 the man (A) bit the dog (N)
 `The man, the dog bit'

Compare the Danish sentence, where there is no morphological indication as to which NP is the subject and which is the object. But such cases are exceptions, and of course, this does not mean that object topicalization in general is excluded in the mainland Scandinavian languages, even though they lack morphological case.

Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson (1993) has recently discussed the relation between morphological case and abstract Case in Icelandic syntax, and the sentences in (4) and (5) are taken from his paper.

It is now generally assumed that the main function of abstract Case is the licensing of Noun Phrases. Sigurðsson shows that a nominative subject, as in (4), is licensed in three different position in the sentence, in (4a), (4b) and (4e). On the other hand, (4c) and (4d) are ungrammatical.

- (4) a. *Fjórir bílar* (N) mundu hafa verið seldir.
 four cars would have been sold.
- b. Það mundu *fjórir bílar* hafa verið seldir.
- c. *Það mundu hafa *fjórir bílar* verið seldir.
- d. *Það mundu hafa verið *fjórir bílar* seldir.
- e. Það mundu hafa verið seldir *fjórir bílar*.
- (5) a. *Fjórum bílum* (D) mundi hafa verið stolið.
 four cars would have been stolen
- b. Það mundi *fjórum bílum* hafa verið stolið.
- c. *Það mundi hafa *fjórum bílum* verið stolið.
- d. *Það mundi hafa verið *fjórum bílum* stolið.
- e. Það mundi hafa verið stolið *fjórum bílum*.

Exactly the same pattern is found with the dative subject in (5). That is, (5a), (5b) and (5e) are grammatical, whereas (5c) and (5d) are not. Sigurðsson claims that this shows that lexical case like the dative in (5) cannot by itself license nominal arguments; the licensing must be independent of morphological case.

I agree with Sigurðsson on this point. However, it is not quite clear whether his claims are also valid for Old Icelandic. It is clear that the word order of Old Icelandic was much less rigid than the word order of the modern language, and I don't know whether a language without rich morphological case would ever allow such a great freedom in word order as older stages of Icelandic exhibit. This, however, merits further investigation.

Anyway, there seems to be general consensus among linguists that the syntactic function of morphological case in Modern Icelandic is trivial, and is not likely to be the factor that keeps the case system alive, so to speak. Let us therefore turn to the possibility of the system having some semantic role.

2.2 Semantic Function

It is well known that in the ancestors of Icelandic, Indo-European, Proto-Germanic, etc., the role of morphological case was very different from its role in the modern Indo-European languages. Indo-European had more morphologically distinct cases, but lacked pre- and postpositions instead. This means that various intra-sentential syntactic and semantic relationships between words and phrases were shown by means of different cases, instead of different prepositions.

Old Icelandic still retained a number of phrases where an NP stands in an oblique case and functions as an adverbial, without any concomitating preposition. Two such examples are shown in (6).

- (6) Hann var stunginn (með) hnífi.
he was stabbed (with) knife
'He was stabbed with a knife.'

In Modern Icelandic, these NPs are usually preceded by the prepositions shown in parentheses. However, both these NPs retain their dative case; but we might say that in Modern Icelandic, this dative case marking is redundant, since the prepositions show the relation of the NPs to the rest of the sentence.

A number of such examples can be found, and we could argue that they show that the semantic function of case is smaller than it used to be. Admittedly, the modern language still has a number of oblique NPs in an adverbial function without a concomitating preposition; but in those cases, the morphological case marking does not appear to be crucial, as shown by the fact that corresponding sentences are found in the mainland Scandinavian languages and English. However, it must be emphasized that Old Icelandic does not have more morphological cases than Modern Icelandic has.

At first glance, it does not seem likely that there is any connection between morphological case and certain thematic roles, because verbs which appear to assign the same thematic roles often take different cases. This is shown in (7)-(9).

- (7) a. Hann hjálpaði mér (D).
 he helped me
 b. Hann aðstoðaði mig (A).
 he assisted me
- (8) a. Hún elskar hann (A).
 she loves him
 b. Hún ann honum (D).
 she loves him
- (9) a. Hún vonar það (A).
 she hopes that
 b. Hún væntir þess (G).
 she expects that

The verbs *help* and *assist* probably take the same thematic role; yet *help* takes dative objects, whereas *assist* takes accusative objects. The verbs *elska* and *unna* have exactly the same meaning; the only difference is that the latter is more formal. However, *elska* takes accusative, whereas *unna* takes dative. Finally, *hope* takes accusative objects, but *expect* takes genitive objects.

So, it appears that morphological case does not serve any function; and if it cannot be predicted from syntactic or semantic features, it must be included in the lexical entry of each verb. In addition to phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic features, we would then need information on the case assigning properties of the verb. This is illustrated in (10) on the handout.

- (10) **Lexical entry of verbs:** /X+Y/_v

Phonological features
 Morphological features
 Syntactic features
 Semantic features
 Case assignment?

3. Predictability of Case

3.1 Case and Thematic Roles

Let us first look at double object verbs. Icelandic has a number of double object verbs, which show various different patterns:

(11) **Double object verbs:**

Dative	Accusative	<i>gefa</i> `give'
Accusative	Dative	<i>svipta</i> `deprive'
Accusative	Genitive	<i>biðja</i> `ask'
Dative	Dative	<i>lofa</i> `promise'

A number of verbs have the first pattern, D-A; a few have the next one, A-D; but only very few verbs have the other patterns. It is quite clear that there is some relationship between cases and thematic roles. The D-A verbs usually take GOAL/BENEFACTIVE in the dative and THEME in the accusative, for instance. Thus, morphological case functions as a marker of a certain thematic role.

- (12) *gefa* `give'
lána `lend'
leigja `rent' GOAL/BENEFACTIVE - THEME
senda `send'
sýna `show'
 etc.

However, there is clearly more to it than this. There are many verbs which might seem to take the same thematic roles, but which nevertheless take different morphological cases. Among these are the pairs *hjálpa/aðstoða* (D/A); *ljúka/klára* (D/A); *gæta/passa* (G/A); etc. Thus, it appears that we will have to specify morphological case in the lexical entry of verbs.

It appears that in Old Icelandic, there are more irregularities in the case government of verbs than there are in the modern language. The majority of

verbs in both stages of the language take accusative objects, but those which take dative and genitive objects do not seem to make up a coherent class. However, there are some indications that this is changing.

Icelandic has some verbs which take genitive objects. However, it appears that the language is trying to get rid of genitive objects; either by using PPs instead, or by introducing new verbs which take accusative objects.

- (13) a. Hún gætti barnsins (G).
she watched the child
'She looked after the child.'
- b. Hún passaði barnið (A).
she watched the child
'She looked after the child.'
- (14) a. Hann lauk verkinu (D).
he finished the job
'He finished the job.'
- b. Hann kláraði verkið (A).
he finished the job
'He finished the job.'
- (15) a. Hann beið mín (G).
he awaited me
'He waited for me.'
- b. Hann beið eftir mér (D).
he waited for me
'He waited for me.'

The so-called "dative sickness" is also very interesting in this respect. As is well known, Icelandic has so-called "quirky" subjects; NPs in an oblique case which act syntactically as a subject. This has been shown in various papers by a number of authors, most notably Avery Andrews (1976), Höskuldur Thráinsson (1979) and Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson (1989). I have argued that these NPs had acquired subject status already in Old Icelandic (Rögnvaldsson 1991).

It is usually claimed that the quirky subjects can be either accusative, dative or genitive. In Modern Icelandic, however, it is quite clear that the status of these three cases is not the same. The genitive subjects are almost nonexistent (except in the passive). It is also clear that the language is trying to get rid of the accusative subjects, either by changing them into the nominative or in the dative.

- (16) a. Bátinn (A) rak að landi.
the boat drove to shore
'The boat drove ashore.'
- b. Baturinn (N) rak að landi.
the boat drove to shore
'The boat drove ashore.'
- (17) a. Reykinn (A) leggur upp
the smoke goes up
'The smoke goes straight up.'
- b. Reykurinn (N) leggur upp
the smoke goes up
'The smoke goes straight up.'
- (18) a. Mig (A) dreymdi vondan draum.
me dreamt a bad dream
'I dreamt a bad dream.'
- b. Mér (D) dreymdi vondan draum.
me dreamt a bad dream
'I dreamt a bad dream.'
- c. Ég (N) dreymdi vondan draum.
I dreamt a bad dream
'I dreamt a bad dream.'
- (19) a. Mig (A) vantar peninga.
me lacks money
'I lack money.'
- b. Mér (D) vantar peninga.
me lacks money
'I lack money.'

There are also many cases where a certain verb takes either accusative or dative objects, depending on the thematic role of the object:

- (20) a. Hann þvoði gólfíð (A).
he washed the floor
- b. Hann þvoði barninu (D).
he washed the child
- (21) a. Hann þurrkaði fötin (A).
he dried the clothes

- b. Hann þurrkaði barninu (D).
 he dried the child
- (22) a. Hann klóraði sig (A).
 he scratched himself
- b. Hann klóraði sér (D).
 he scratched himself

As Jóhanna Barðdal (1993) has recently pointed out, it appears that some verbs which used to take only the accusative now have started to take the dative also. From the examples above, it is fairly clear that the dative is used when the object bears the BENEFACTIVE role. Jóhanna also points out that the same pattern is found with certain prepositions:

- (23) a. Hann kom með mig (A).
 he came with me
 `He brought me with him.'
- b. Hann kom með mér (D).
 he came with me
 `He accompanied me.'

It appears that the rules for verb governed morphological case are something like this:

- (24) a. Dative is the unmarked case for internal arguments other than THEME (i.e., BENEFACTIVE, EXPERIENCER, GOAL ...)
- b. THEME can be idiosyncratically marked for dative/genitive
- c. Accusative is the unmarked case for objects
- d. Individual verbs tend to distinguish different thematic roles by assigning different morphological cases to them.

I think (24d) is very important. It means that if a certain verb can assign two different thematic roles, either at once, like double object verbs, or alternatively, the verb will tend to assign different cases to these objects. When a verb assigns only one thematic role, the morphological case is not nearly as important, and thus the possibilities of idiosyncratic case marking are greater, without any obvious connection to the thematic role. It is for instance very difficult to find any thematic difference between *ræskja sig* `clear one's throat', which takes accusative, and *snýta sér* `blow one's nose', which takes dative, that would explain the different case government of these verbs.

- (25) a. Hann ræksti sig (A).

he cleared [throat] REFL
'He cleared his throat.'

- b. Hann snýtti sér (D).
he blew [nose] REFL
'He blew his nose.'

The main thing is that in these cases, no other thematic role is possible, and hence the morphological cases will not have any differentiating function.

If we compare Old and Modern Icelandic, it is evident that the frequency of the individual cases has changed.

(26)		<i>Old Icelandic</i>	<i>Modern Icelandic</i>	
	<i>Nominative</i>	27,54	27,6	
	<i>Accusative</i>	41,13	30,9	(÷10%)
	<i>Dative</i>	21,71	30,2	(+10%)
	<i>Genitive</i>	9,62	11,3	

It is interesting to note that the frequency of the nominative is almost exactly the same in Old and Modern Icelandic, and the frequency of the genitive is very similar in both stages. But there are considerable differences in the frequency of the accusative and the dative. In Old Icelandic, the accusative is almost twice as frequent as the dative, whereas in Modern Icelandic, the figures for these two cases are almost exactly the same. It would be very interesting to know the reasons for this difference.