

QUIRKY SUBJECTS IN OLD ICELANDIC

1. The concordance

Since the beginning of 1989, I have been working on the language of the Icelandic Sagas, together with several other people. This project is based on a new edition of the Sagas, which appeared in 1985 and 1986 (*Íslendinga sögur* 1985-6). The Sagas are around 40, but some of them exist in two widely different versions, so that 50 different texts are printed in this new edition. This is around 5 megabytes of text, or nearly 900.000 running words.

The first step was to lemmatize the text, and make a KWIC-concordance of it. This work is now finished, and various frequency studies of the vocabulary have already been carried out (see Rögnvaldsson 1990b). The next step, which is now in its beginning stage, is to make a detailed syntactic description of the language of the Sagas. This has never been done before. Nygaard's book from 1905, *Norrøn syntax*, is of course an invaluable tool for any student of Old Icelandic. However, its value is deminished by several features. One is that it is based on both Icelandic and Norwegian texts. Another is that it covers both the so-called "popular style" of the Sagas, and also the "learned style" of homilies, translations from Latin etc. The third is that the editions that it is based on are often not very reliable.

In connection with the syntactic description, we are of course planning to do some theoretical work. We feel that we are now in a unique position for answering several questions on the syntax of Old Icelandic, and the changes that have occurred between Old and Modern Icelandic.

2. Quirky subjects in Modern Icelandic

As an example of the use of the concordance in collecting data, I will now try to answer one question that has sometimes been put forward concerning the status of some oblique NPs that tend to stand in initial position in sentences, both in Old and Modern Icelandic. The relevant data ought to be familiar to most readers, so I'll only give two examples:

(1) Mig vantar peninga
Me (ACC) needs money
'I need money'

(2) Mér líkar maturinn
Me (DAT) likes the food
'I like the food'

As is well known, it has repeatedly been claimed that these oblique NPs are syntactic subjects. To support this claim, several people have been developing more and more tests, which are all meant to show that these NPs behave syntactically like nominative subjects. In Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson's dissertation (1989), the list of these tests looks like the one in (3):

- (3)
 1. Topicalization
 2. Non-topicalization
 3. Position in subordinate clauses
 4. AcI (Raising to object)
 5. NcI (Raising to subject)
 6. Reflexivization
 7. Control
 8. Extraction
 9. Heavy Subject Shift
 10. Cliticization
 11. Conjunction Reduction

Sigurðsson concludes that "the evidence for the subjecthood of oblique subjects is overwhelming", even though some of these tests "probably do not test subjecthood, but rather some properties that are most typical of subjects" (1989:209).

2. Quirky subjects in Old Icelandic

2.1

Even though I think it has been shown conclusively that oblique, or quirky, subjects do exist in Modern Icelandic, it remains to be shown whether this was also the case in Old Icelandic. This is difficult for various reasons. The main reason is of course a familiar one; we do not have any native speakers of Old Icelandic whom we can ask to judge the grammaticality of our examples. In spite of this, however, we might be tempted to believe that our subject tests could be applied to the existing texts. Many of these tests are quite simple and easy to apply, and the relevant example sentences should not be hard to find.

Let me just point out before going further that I am assuming here that Old Icelandic **has** syntactic subjects, with roughly the same characteristics as Modern Icelandic. In various papers, Jan Terje Faarlund has argued for a different analysis (cf., for instance, Faarlund 1987); and it is certainly true that Old Norse was more topic-prominent than Modern Icelandic, not to mention Modern Norwegian. Nevertheless, I don't think there is any doubt that **subject** plays an important role in the syntax of Old Icelandic.

The first linguist who tried to apply some of the subject tests to Old Icelandic, I believe, was Helgi Bernóðsson in his master's thesis (1982). He used three of these tests; Reflexivization, Conjunction Reduction, and AcI, or Subject-to-Object Raising. His conclusion was that these test gave the same results for Old Icelandic as they do for Modern Icelandic. Nevertheless, Bernóðsson did not claim that these tests **proved** that the oblique subject-like NPs of Old Icelandic actually were subjects; he only concluded that they were **consistent** with such a claim.

The next one to take up this issue was Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson in his master's thesis (1983). Sigurðsson was studying the basic word order of Old Icelandic, and he had to decide whether to count sentences with oblique subject-like NPs in initial position as SV-sentences. He points out that at least two of Bernóðsson's arguments cannot be relied on. I will now quickly review his analysis as regards these tests; they are Reflexivization and Conjunction Reduction.

2.2 Reflexivization

In Modern Icelandic, nominative subjects obligatorily trigger reflexivization inside their minimal clause, provided that the phrase that contains the reflexive is predicated of the subject. This is also valid for quirky subjects. Objects, however, are rarely triggers of reflexivization, even though this seems to be subject to dialectal or even idiolectal variation.

- (4) Jón_i rakaði sig_i/*hann_i
 John shaved himself/*him
 `John shaved himself'
- (5) Ég rétti Jón_i fötin %sín_i/hans_i
 I handed John the clothes REFL/his
 `I handed John's clothes to him'

In Old Icelandic, on the other hand, objects of verbs and prepositions are very often triggers of reflexivization.

- (6) Jarl þakkaði honum_iorð sín_i
 Earl thanked him words REFL
 `The earl thanked him for his words'
- (Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar, p. 2062)

- (7) Það er mér sagt að þú grípir fyrir mönnum_i góss sitt_i
 It is me said that you grasp for men things
 REFL
 `I am told that you steal people's properties'
- (Grettis saga, p. 1039)

Hence, even though we find that oblique NPs in subject position usually trigger reflexivization, it does not group them as conclusively with nominative subjects as it does in Modern Icelandic.

2.3 Conjunction Reduction

In Modern Icelandic, the subject of the second of two conjoined sentences is usually omitted if it is coreferential with the subject of the first conjunct. This is also valid for quirky subjects; i.e., a quirky subject is omitted if it is coreferential with a nominative subject in a preceding conjoined clause, and a nominative subject is also omitted if it is coreferential with a quirky subject in a preceding conjoined clause (see Rögnvaldsson 1982).

- (8) Ég_i var svangur og ____i langaði í mat
 I was hungry and [ACC] wanted in food
 `I was hungry and wanted some food'
- (9) Mér_i (DAT) leiddist og ____i fór því heim
 Me (DAT) bored and [NOM]went thus home
 `I was bored and therefore I went home'

Now, such sentences are also common in Old Icelandic. However, it is clear that several types of NP-ellipsis are grammatical in Old Icelandic but do not occur in Modern Icelandic. The

subject, for instance, is often omitted if it is coreferential with a preceding object; and the object is sometimes omitted if it is coreferential with a preceding subject or object (cf., for instance, Hjartardóttir 1987:57; Thráinsson & Hjartardóttir 1986:155).

(10) Hann höggur sverðinu_i ... og kom ____i í þvertréið
 He hits (with) the sword and came ____i in the beam
 `He hits with the sword and it stuck in the beam'
 (Njáls saga, p. 250)

(11) ... og er Egill_i sá skipið, þá kenndi hann ____i
 þegar
 ... and when Egill saw the ship, then knew he at
 once
 `And when Egill saw the ship, he knew it immediately'
 (Egils saga, p. 452)

Both types of ellipsis are ungrammatical in Modern Icelandic (with the exception of object ellipsis discussed in Rögnvaldsson 1990a). Hence, this test cannot be used either.

2.4 Control

So, a closer look at the facts shows that it is much more difficult than we might expect to apply the subject tests to Old Icelandic. The reason is that various syntactic changes have occurred in Icelandic during the last 700 years or so; and some of these changes are a necessary prerequisite for many of the subject tests that we are used to apply for Modern Icelandic. In addition to these two we might mention the Control test. Examples of control verbs with quirky subjects are difficult to find, even in Modern Icelandic. It also turns out that many of the typical control verbs of Modern Icelandic, such as *reyna* `try', *skipa* `order', *vonast til* `hope (for)', etc., either do not exist in Old Icelandic, or they are not control verbs at all.

3. Subject tests that work

3.1

In the light of this, Sigurðsson (1983) did not count the oblique subject-like NPs as grammatical subjects in his study of Narrative Inversion in Old Icelandic. However, it must be emphasized that he did not reject the possibility that they were subjects at that time; he only concluded that the data available were not conclusive. Therefore, we thought it would be interesting to see if the concordance would make it possible for us to solve this problem. And in fact, I believe that we have some tests left that make it possible for us to determine the status of oblique subject-like NPs in Old Icelandic. So let us now turn to these tests.

3.2 AcI

The first of these test - and one which was also used by Bernóðsson (1982) - is the AcI-test, or Raising to object, or ECM, or whatever you might want to call it. In Modern Icelandic, the case of the quirky subject (usually dative) overrides the normal accusative in this construction, as

These tests have to do with word order. If the oblique NPs of Old Icelandic which we are discussing are not grammatical (S-structure) subjects, but rather topicalized objects, we would not expect them to simply invert with the finite verb, as subjects do, when something else is preposed, for instance an adverbial phrase. Instead, we would expect them to remain in the usual place of the object, after the main verb. In sentences with only one verb, this cannot be seen, of course, since an inverted subject is in the same place (in linear order) as the object should be.

- (17) a Mig dreymdi illa í nótt
 Me (ACC) dreamed badly in night
 'I had bad dreams last night'
- b Í nótt dreymdi mig illa
 In night dreamed me (ACC) badly
 'Last night I had bad dreams'

But in sentences with an auxiliary, an inverted subject should immediately follow the finite auxiliary verb, whereas an object would be expected to follow the main verb. This can be seen by looking at the verb *vanta* 'lack', that usually takes two accusative arguments, one of which passes all the usual subject tests in Modern Icelandic. This NP is in initial position in (18)a; and as (18)b and c show, it must immediately follow the finite verb when a prepositional phrase is fronted, but cannot possibly follow the main verb. On the other hand, (19) shows that even though the other accusative **can** stand in initial position, it does not simply invert with the verb when something else is fronted; then it must stay to the right of the main verb, as in (19)b (which is the same as (18)c).

- (18) a Svein hefur oft vantað peninga í vetur
 Sveinn (ACC) has often lacked money in winter
 'Sveinn have often lacked money this winter'
- b Í vetur hefur Svein oft vantað peninga
 In winter has Sveinn (ACC) often lacked money
 'This winter, Sveinn has often lacked money'
- c *Í vetur hefur oft vantað Svein peninga
 In winter has often lacked Sveinn (ACC) money
- (19) a Peninga hefur Svein oft vantað í vetur
 Money has Sveinn (ACC) often lacked in winter
 'Sveinn has often lacked money this winter'
- b *Í vetur hefur peninga oft vantað Svein
 In winter has money often lacked Sveinn (ACC)
- c Í vetur hefur Svein oft vantað peninga
 In winter has Sveinn (ACC) often lacked money
 'This winter, Sveinn has often lacked money'

Hence, it is interesting to see what happens to the oblique subject-like NPs of Old Icelandic in such sentences. I have looked at thousands of sentences with an auxiliary verb in the Sagas, and

I have not found a single case where inverted oblique subject-like NPs follow the main verb; they always immediately follow the finite verb.

(20) Lengi **hefir mér** það í hug verið
 Long has me (DAT) it in mind been
 'I have been thinking of this for a long time'
 (Njáls saga, p. 125)

(21) Góðan draum **hefir mig** enn dreymt
 Good dream has me (ACC) still dreamt
 'Once again, I have had a good dream'
 (Flóamanna saga, p. 752)

(22) Ei **mun þig** hér mat skorta
 Not will you (ACC) here food lack
 'You are not going to lack food here'
 (Svarfdæla saga, p. 1806)

This appears to be a strong indication of the subject status of these NPs already in Old Icelandic.

3.4 Quirky subjects following the finite verb

One of the main characteristics of subjects in Icelandic is of course their tendency to stand in initial position in sentences. In most cases, however, this cannot be used as a decisive criterion, since other phrases **can** also be fronted. Nevertheless, we might argue that if oblique subject-like NPs follow the finite verb more often than ordinary nominative subjects do, and more often than the quirky subjects of Modern Icelandic do, this would indicate that these oblique NPs had not acquired subject status in Old Icelandic. Sigurðsson (1983) says that it is his feeling that this is in fact the case. However, this is very difficult to assess, since ordinary nominative subjects also differ in this respect, as pointed out by Platzack (1985).

There are however certain constructions where the subject **must** be in initial position. This is the case after the conjunction *en* 'but'. The so-called Narrative Inversion, which is very common in Old Icelandic (and in at least certain styles of Modern Icelandic, too) is common after the conjunction *og* 'and', but it is almost nonexistent after *en*. In his extensive study of inversion in Old Icelandic, Sigurðsson (1983) only found two sentences with inversion after *en*, compared to 426 sentences with SV-order after *en*. In the Sagas, I found the following sentences, among others:

(23) ...en uggir mig ...að þú megir varla í kyrrðum sitja
 ...but fears me that you may hardly in stillness sit
 'But I fear that you will not live in peace'
 (Grettis saga, p. 1019)

(24) "...En líkar mér," segir hann, "kvonfangið ..."
 "... but likes me," says he, "the marriage ..."
 '"But I like," he says, "this marriage ..."'
 (Reykðæla saga, p. 1753)

If the oblique NPs are subjects here, we would not expect them to follow the finite verb. If they

are objects, however, the sentences are by no means exceptional, since subject gaps are possible after *en* in Old Icelandic, for instance with weather verbs and Heavy Subject Shift. These sentence could therefore be considered an argument against the subjecthood of oblique NPs in Old Icelandic.

When one looks at the examples of verbs taking oblique subject-like NPs in Old Icelandic, it is remarkable that the word *það* often occurs in initial position. A few examples:

(25) *En þaðdreymdi mig nú að eg þóttist ganga að húsi einu*
 But it dreamed me (ACC) now that I felt walk to house one
 'But I dreamed that I was walking towards a certain house'
 (Gísla saga, p. 876)

(26) *Það þykir mér ráð að vér höldum að landi*
 It feels me (DAT) advice that we travel to land
 'I think it adviceable that we sail ashore'
 (Víglundar saga, p. 1967)

(27) *Það dreymdi mig að eg þóttist kominn til Hvítár ...*
 It dreamed me (ACC) that I felt come to Hvítá ...
 'I dreamed that I was at the river Hvítá ...'
 (Þórðar saga hreðu, p. 2016)

Now, we know that *það* has a very disputable status in Modern Icelandic. It is not clear that *það* is ever used as a dummy in Old Icelandic; it is never used with weather verbs nor in sentences with Heavy Subject Shift. It is used with Extraposed clauses, but there it may be argued that it is the head of a complex NP, as Thráinsson does in his dissertation (1979). The sentences in (25)-(27) might thus be analyzed as involving topicalization of the left branch of this complex NP, i.e. the *það*, which then prevents the oblique NPs from occupying initial position.

However, it seems suspicious that this is so common with verbs taking oblique subject-like NPs. Furthermore, sentences like (30)-(32) do not sound very normal in Modern Icelandic, even though they are grammatical; it is much more normal to have the oblique NPs in subject position. We might thus be tempted to think that the frequency of such sentences shows that these oblique NPs are not subjects, and therefore do not have as strong tendency to occupy initial position as they have in Modern Icelandic. In these sentences, we might then see the beginning development of *það* as a dummy.

3.5 A semantic classification of verbs

The facts presented above seem to speak against the subject status of oblique subject-like NPs in Old Icelandic. But on a closer inspection we see that this is not the case. There is a limited number of verbs taking nominative subjects which also enter into this construction. These are verbs like *ætla* 'think', *vita* 'know', *vilja* 'want' and a few others.

(28) *Það ætla eg að þú sért hinn versti karl*
 It think I that you are the worst man
 'I think that you are a very bad fellow'
 (Bandamanna saga, p. 37)

(29) ... *það veit eg að hann er í þínum hífýlum*

... it know I that he is in your houses
'I know that he is in your house'

(Fljótsdæla saga, p. 218)

(30) Það vil eg að við séum báðir saman ...
It want I that we be both together ...
'I want us to be together'

(Bandamanna saga, p. 23)

A particularly good example is the verb *ugga* 'fear'. This verb sometimes takes a nominative subject, and sometimes an NP in the accusative, without any difference in meaning; and both types are used in this construction.

(31) Það uggi eg að þú sért sár
It fear I (NOM) that you are hurt
'I fear that you are hurt'

(Víga-Glúms saga, p. 1909)

(32) ... en það uggir mig að of lítt hafi á komið ...
... but it fears me (ACC) that too little has on
come ...
'But I fear that it did not hit (her) well enough'

(Grettis saga, p. 1073)

Interestingly, the same goes for inversion after *en* mentioned above. There are some examples of inversion with nominative subjects, even though they are few; and most or even all of these examples are with the same verbs as mentioned just before; i.e. *vilja*, *vita* and *ætla*.

(33) ... en vil eg segja yður hvað eg vil af yður
... but want I say you what I want from you
'... but I shall tell you what I want from you'

(Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss, p. 69)

(34) En veit eg hvað þú munt þér ætla
But know I what you will you intend
'But I know what you want'

(Njáls saga, p. 323)

(35) ... en veit eg hverjir gert hafa
... but know I who done have
'But I know who have done (this)'

(Hallfreðar saga, p. 1222)

It is clear that these verbs share certain semantic features; and that the verbs taking oblique NPs that are used in these constructions have these semantic features too. This indicates that experiencers, be they dative, accusative, or nominative, have not as strong tendency as agentive subjects to stand in initial position. In this respect, Old Icelandic appears to differ from Modern Icelandic, where all subjects appear to have equally strong tendency to occupy the initial position.

4. Conclusion

My conclusion is that there seems to be no reason for assuming that the status of quirky subjects is different in Old Icelandic than in Modern Icelandic. To be sure, many of the subject tests commonly used for Modern Icelandic are not available for Old Icelandic. Others are available, but do not give as conclusive evidence as they do in Modern Icelandic; for instance, the Reflexivization test and the Conjunction Reduction test. However, there are some tests left which I believe show conclusively that the oblique NPs in question had already acquired subject status in Old Icelandic. This is especially AcI and inversion in sentences with an auxiliary verb.

However, there are indications that a syntactic change which affects oblique subject-like NPs has in fact occurred in the history of Icelandic. But it is not the subject status of these NPs that has changed; they had acquired subject status already in Old Icelandic. What has changed is presumably the function of word order. In Modern Icelandic, word order is syntactically governed, whereas we have brought forth some indications that it was more semantically governed in Old Icelandic.

There is a growing interest in historical syntax for the moment, as evidenced by several conferences this year. I hope to have shown that when one is doing historical syntax, it is absolutely necessary to have access to a big corpus of texts, and a lemmatized concordance. Many of the constructions involved in the subject test are so rare that one can read hundreds of pages without finding any examples of them. But a computerized database and a lemmatized concordance surely make life easier for those doing historical syntax.

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