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RIGHTWARD DISPLACEMENT OF NPs IN ICELANDIC
- Formal and Functional Characteristics -

0. Introduction

In this paper I will look at two rightward movement rules of Icelandic syntax; Indefinite NP Postposing (INPP) and Heavy NP Shift (HNPS). In the first part of the paper, the formal characteristics of the rules are described. A movement analysis of them is defended, against a base-generated account. It is shown that, contrary to the usual assumptions, each rule moves both subjects and objects.

In the second part, I look closer at the function of the rules; why "indefiniteness" and "heaviness" make it possible to postpose NPs. I find that really the same feature characterizes all NPs that can be postposed; it must be possible to interpret them as carrying new information. I conclude that INPP and HNPS can and should be subsumed under one rule.

1. Form

1.1 INPP and There-insertion

It is sometimes said that INPP "is the Icelandic equivalent of There-insertion in English" (Maling 1980:181n), but that is only partly true. In English, There-insertion only applies to a limited number of verbs (Zaenen 1980:95), but INPP in Icelandic applies to all sorts of verbs, transitive as well as intransitive (cf. Maling & Zaenen 1978:483, Thráinsson 1979:473). Let us take some examples:

- (1) a Margt fólk kom í veisluna
'Many people came to the party'
- b Það kom margt fólk í veisluna
'There came many people to the party'
- (2) a Einhverjir strákar brutu gluggann
'Some boys broke the window'
- b Það brutu einhverjir strákar gluggann
'There broke some boys the window'

As the name of the English rule indicates, the word there usually stands in initial position instead of the postposed subject.

In Icelandic, on the other hand, the dummy það (which is also used in extraposition sentences) is not needed when some other NP or PP is fronted. The function of það appears to be only to satisfy some kind of a Verb-Second constraint (cf. Maling & Zaenen 1978, Maling 1980), as it never shows up unless the verb would otherwise be in first position. Thus, we can get (3) instead of (1)b:¹⁾

- (3) Í veisluna kom margt fólk
'To the party came many people'

It could be claimed, of course, that (3) is not a case of INPP, but rather simple inversion of the subject and the finite verb; after all, such inversion is obligatory when some phrase other than the subject is fronted. However, this account breaks down when we observe that an indefinite subject need not end up immediately following the verb, as it does by inversion; its "landing site" can be at various places in surface structure, as the following examples show:

- (4)a Gamall maður hefur komið hingað í dag
'An old man has come here today'
b Það hefur gamall maður komið hingað í dag
'There has an old man come here today'
c Það hefur komið gamall maður hingað í dag
d Það hefur komið hingað gamall maður í dag
e Það hefur komið hingað í dag gamall maður

The main restriction on the landing site seems to be that it can not be inside a phrase (with the exception of VP, which is one of my reasons for claiming that VP does not exist in Icelandic, see Rögnvaldsson 1983). The rule also observes Ross' (1967) constraints on rightward movement.

It has recently been claimed by Bresnan (1982) that There-insertion in English is not a movement rule, and that There is the real subject of sentences with an "extra" indefinite NP immediately following the finite verb. She calls this "extra" NP an object, and claims that it is base-generated in the position

1) Besides being a dummy, það can also be a neuter personal pronoun. Therefore, I have avoided the use of neuter subjects in the examples, so as to exclude the possibility of some kind of anaphoric relation between það and the postposed subject.

where it appears in surface structure.

This solution may work in English, but it seems to be inapplicable in Icelandic for several reasons. I will only mention two (for more arguments see Rögnvaldsson 1982, Chapter 4.2). First, it would have to be possible to base-generate the "extra object" at various places in the predicate, as (4)b-e show. This would cost many new phrase-structure rules. And second, it would have to be explained why this "extra object" obligatorily triggers reflexivization within a clause, just as subjects do but objects don't (cf. Thráinsson 1979:289-292).

There remains one argument, which Bresnan (1982) considers to be her strongest against a movement analysis. This argument depends on certain agreement facts in English, and it is too complicated to go into here. But it is clear that this argument does not apply to Icelandic, because Icelandic verbs can sometimes agree in number with a nominative other than the subject. For detailed argumentation, see Rögnvaldsson (1982, Chapter 4.2).

It is also to be noted that INPP is not limited to subjects; the postposing of objects, as in (5), seems to be governed by the same principles. An indefinite object can be moved to the right over several adverbials, as in (5)b, but a definite object can not, as (5)c shows:

- (5)a Ég sá einhvern mann þarna í gær.
'I saw some man there yesterday'
b Ég sá þarna í gær einhvern mann.
'I saw there yesterday some man'
c *Ég sá þarna í gær Jón.
'I saw there yesterday John'

1.2 Postposing of subjects by HNPS

Now let's turn to HNPS. The classic treatment of the rule is Ross (1967), who observed that length is not the only factor determining whether or not postposing of an object is possible; "complex" NPs (containing a PP or a sentence) appear to be easier to postpose than equally long NPs with a "flat" structure (such as coordinate NPs). But, as Ross (1967:28) notes,

The whole problem area of what NP are felt to be "heavy" or "complex" borders on questions of style, and there seems to be a baffling array of dialectal, or possibly even idiolectal, variations here.

This seems to be the case in Icelandic, too; we come back to this problem in the second part of the paper. What matters now is Postal's (1974) statement that the rule does not move subjects. He illustrated this with sentences like:

- (6)a All of the men who recovered from mononucleosis are happy
 b *Are happy all of the men who recovered from mononucleosis

At first, this principle appears to hold in Icelandic also:

- (7)a Maðurinn sem ætlar að gera við bílinn er kominn
 'The man who is going to repair the car has arrived'
 b *Er kominn maðurinn sem ætlar að gera við bílinn
 'Has arrived the man who is going to repair the car'

But remember that Icelandic usually disallows a finite verb in initial position in declarative sentences. If we insert the dummy það in the subject position in (7)b, we get (7)c, which is fine:

- (7)c Það er kominn maðurinn sem ætlar að gera við bílinn
 'There has arrived the man who is going to repair the car'

This indicates that it is not the postposing itself which is disallowed; rather, it is the Verb-Second constraint that must not be broken.

As for the arguments for a movement analysis of sentences like (7)c, rather than base-generation of the "extra" NP in final position, we can bring forth many of the same arguments as for INPP as a movement rule, so I won't recapitulate them here.

2. Function

2.1 Conditions on postposed NPs

As the term "Indefinite" NP Postposing indicates, it is usually considered impossible to postpose definite NPs (unless they are "heavy"). Admittedly, it is rarely stated which NPs are definite and which are not; but it appears that personal pronouns, proper names, and NPs having a definite article are considered definite. Other NPs (i.e., those without a definite article and indefinite pronouns) are thus indefinite, and should be able to get postposed, in contrast with the others. In fact, the pre-

sence or absence of a definite article is sometimes used as a defining feature of whether INPP can have applied, or whether some other rule must be involved (cf. Levin 1981). Let us look at sentences where we have postposed NPs which are definite according to the definition given above:

- (8) a Jón kom í veisluna
'John came to the party'
b *Það kom Jón í veisluna
'There came John to the party'
- (9) a Strákarnir brutu gluggann
'The boys broke the window'
b *Það brutu strákarnir gluggann
'There broke the boys the window'

If we compare these sentences with (1)b and (2)b, we can conclude that the distinction between definite and indefinite NPs with respect to postposing appears to be well-founded, and in fact inevitable.

2.2 Why indefiniteness?

Now look at the following sentences:

- (10) Það var troðfullur salurinn þegar sýningin hófst
'There was full (of people) the theatre when the performance started'
- (11) Það festist rútan á leiðinni norður
'There got stuck the bus on the way north'
- (12) Það skín alltaf sólin
'There shines always the sun'

There is no doubt that, according to the argumentation in the first part of the paper, the underlined NPs salurinn, rútan, and sólin are the subjects of (10)-(12), respectively; and there is also no doubt that they must have originated in initial position, but have been moved to the right and the dummy það inserted in the subject slot. Yet, they are all definite, so that INPP should be excluded; and they are not particularly heavy, so that HNPS can not be responsible either. Let us therefore take a closer look at the question of definiteness; why should indefinite NPs be easier to postpose than definites? To answer this, we must introduce some principles of functional syntax.

It is a well-known fact that a wide-spread tendency in many languages is for so-called "new information" to appear relative-

ly late in the sentence. "Old" or "given" information, on the other hand, tends to come early in the sentence. But what is "given" and what is "new"? I quote here Chafe's (1976:30) definition of these two terms:

Given (or old) information is that knowledge which the speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the addressee at the time of the utterance. So-called new information is what the speaker assumes he is introducing into the addressee's consciousness by what he says.

Chafe (1976) points out, that although givenness and definiteness often go together, these terms must be kept distinct, as there is no one-to-one correspondence between them.

Now we are coming right to the point. We must keep in mind that the usual function of the definite article is anaphoric; i. e., to mark the NPs which have been talked about or mentioned, so as to make it easier for the listener/reader to identify their referents. That is, NPs typically get a definite article by the virtue of having been talked about, and hence being "given" according to Chafe's definition quoted above.

However, this is not the case in (10)-(12). The NPs there need not at all have been talked about. Each NP has only one possible referent in the situation, and hence it is natural to use the definite article, even though it is not anaphoric here. In sentence (10), we may assume that the performance has been mentioned before. Therefore, the speaker expects the listener to know which theatre he means, although it has not been mentioned in the discourse; he therefore uses the definite article, although the theatre is "new information". In (11), there is also enough context in the sentence to make the listener able to identify the referent of the bus; it is of course 'the bus that goes north'. In (12), there is, of course, no question of "which sun" (cf. also Chafe 1976:39).

2.3 Postposing of new information

Thus, we come to the conclusion that all these NPs, although definite, can be interpreted as new, according to Chafe's definition. I would like to propose, then, that we put new instead of indefinite in the characterization of NPs that can be postposed. This means that formal features such as presence or absence of a definite article can no longer be used to predict

which NPs can be postposed.

Now let's turn to the function of HNPS. It seems to me that it is roughly the same as that of INPP. Remember that most "heavy" NPs which get postposed contain either a PP or an S. Usually this PP or S serves to identify or explain further the content of the head NP, as can be seen from the following examples.

- (13) Ég mætti konunni í gráa húsinu í morgun
'I met the woman (who lives) in the grey house this morning'
- (14) Jón hjálpaði gamla karlinum sem öllum bykir vænt um
'John helped the old man who everybody is fond of'

This means that although the head NPs are formally definite, it is not necessary that their referents have been mentioned before. The PP or S makes the listener capable of identifying them; but still they are new information in the sentence. This also explains why it is easier to postpose "complex" NPs than equally long NPs having "flat" structure; in the "flat" NPs there is no head word which the others serve to explain. Thus, it is much more difficult to interpret a definite noun in a "flat" NP as carrying new information.

3. Conclusion

I think this case may be typical of the interactions between formal and functional factors which we so often get in syntax. There has been a strong tendency in generative syntax to let the formal factors carry the whole burden of explaining, but I think this is misleading, and hope to have shown here a case where it does not work. But let me stress that I am not denying the importance of formal factors. It is remarkable that leading linguists, both in functional grammar such as Kuno (1980), and in formal generative syntax such as Chomsky (1981), make clear their opinion that both formal and functional factors have their place in the overall grammatical description.

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