

The emergence of oblique subjects: Identifiable processes in the history of Icelandic

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Diachronic studies on oblique subject-like NPs (henceforth, oblique subjects) have concentrated on showing that such phenomena represent an archaic layer in the languages in which they occur (Barðdal et al. 2020, Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005, Bauer 2000). Nevertheless, it is known that predicate-specific oblique subjects have emerged at different times in various languages (e.g. Pooth et al. 2019). In this paper, we focus on how such changes come about. In particular, we investigate three processes whereby oblique subjects have emerged in the history of Icelandic. These are *Oblique-Case Substitution* (OCS), *Case-Preserving Anticausativization* (CPA) and *Argument Swapping* (ARS). Careful analysis of relevant examples shows that they have emerged as a consequence of productive processes in the history of Icelandic.

OCS is a type of morphosyntactic leveling targeting experiencer predicates (Jónsson & Eythórsson 2005), causing nominative experiencer subjects to be replaced by oblique ones. Recent examples in Modern Icelandic show that the process is productive. Thus, *hlakka til* ‘look forward to’, originally taking a nominative subject, is attested with an oblique subject (accusative and dative) since the early 20th century.

Anticausativization is a general process involving the omission of the external argument in transitive structures. A special case of anticausativization is CPA (termed Oblique Anticausativization by Barðdal et al. 2020), where the oblique case of the object of a transitive verb is “preserved” with the subject of the anticausative variant, resulting in an oblique-subject construction (e.g. Sigurðsson 2005, Schäfer 2008, Cennamo, Eythórsson & Barðdal 2015). According to Barðdal et al. (2020), semantic connections between the transitive and anticausative variants are “synchronically opaque” in Modern Icelandic. We argue against this view, claiming that the connection must still be transparent as new instances of CPA would otherwise not be expected. Our evidence includes examples that fit the pattern of case-preservation in anticausativization (CPA), e.g. the intransitive verb *fjölgja* ‘increase’ with a dative subject rather than an earlier nominative. This particular change hinges on a previous change in the case pattern of the transitive variant, and therefore it cannot be an instance of OCS.

Finally, ARS involves a reanalysis of an object as a subject. Our arguments are primarily based on the historical development of *-st* predicates (the so-called “middle”, cf. Ottósson 1992, Ottosson 2008) like *takast* ‘succeed’. In cases where the oblique argument with such predicates was animate, it was typically fronted to clause-initial position, enabling its reinterpretation as a subject (e.g. Haspelmath 2001). On our account, the oblique subject in a dative–nominative structure like *Mér*(DAT) *tókst þetta*(NOM) (me.DAT succeeded this.NOM, i.e. ‘I succeeded in this’) arose through ARS from an earlier nominative–dative structure.

To summarize, predicate-specific oblique subjects have emerged throughout the history of Icelandic. The novel contribution of this paper is spelling out the precise mechanisms of how such changes come about. Focusing on three general processes, OCS, CPA and ARS, we demonstrate that these have been productive at different periods, and argue that some of them still are to a certain degree.

Keywords: syntax, oblique subject, oblique-case substitution, anticausative, argument swapping, Icelandic

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