

Expletives in Icelandic: a reassessment

Thórhallur Eythórsson

University of Iceland

(tolli@hi.is)

It is widely agreed that the expletive *það* in Icelandic developed from a homophonous referential pronoun (3sg neut.). The expletive is only found in clause-initial position in specific clause types. The criteria distinguishing between expletives and pronouns are enumerated in Thráinsson (2007). Traditionally, it is assumed that the first clear cases of the expletive in Icelandic appeared around 1500 (Rögnvaldsson 2002). Booth (2019), however, claims that there were expletive elements already in Old Icelandic (ca. 1150–1550) (cf. also Booth 2018). The goal of this paper is to examine this claim and to refute it. I defend the view that there is no unequivocal evidence of the expletive in Icelandic before the late 15th century, and that it occurs first in translations from Middle Low German, Middle English, and Danish. I argue that the emergence of the expletive was due to pattern-replication in a contact situation (cf. Heine & Kuteva 2005, Matras 2009), leading to an abrupt reanalysis of the referential pronoun as a structural filler. Acknowledging that most occurrences of *það* in Old Icelandic involve a referential pronoun (cataphoric or anaphoric), Booth (2019) nevertheless contends that an expletive analysis is warranted by the element being non-referential in some cases, as well as its increased occurrence in clause-initial position. I show that this view is mistaken. Booth's examples are mostly drawn from the Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC; Wallenberg et al. 2011), which is based on normalized texts rather than scholarly editions and is therefore not always reliable. Moreover, her claims are due to insufficient consideration of the context in which *það* occurs, and finally, there is no evidence for a gradual development. On the methodological approach adopted here an element which can be argued to refer to a particular phrase or event in the context is classified as a pronoun and not as an expletive. Closer examination of the critical Old Icelandic examples reveals that *það* is referential in all cases. For instance, in (1) *það* must be considered in the context of the previous clause, which is not provided by Booth in this example.

(1) **Það** var snemma um morgun.

it was early in morning 'It was early in the morning.' (Bandamanna saga, ch. 12)

Observe that also in Modern Icelandic there are instances which appear ambiguous between a pronoun and an expletive; however, these can all be shown to involve pronouns, as in (2), where *það* cataphorically refers to a proposition in a following embedded clause (Thráinsson 2007).

(2) **Það** er líklegt **að tunglið sé úr osti.**

it is likely that moon-the be of cheese 'It is likely that the moon is made of cheese.'

In order to test the hypothesis of contact influence in the development of the expletive, a representative sample of original source-language texts were studied, establishing that the expletive in the Icelandic translations has a match in these. It should be borne in mind that unambiguous cases of expletives are attested earlier in related languages, e.g. Old Swedish (Falk 1993) and Old Norwegian (Faarlund 1990, Kinn 2016). In conclusion, there is no clear evidence of expletives in Old Icelandic, not even to the limited degree proposed by Booth (2019). In the relevant examples, the element in question turns out to be referential, once the proper context has been examined. Appearing first in translated texts around 1500, the expletive emerged as an instance of pattern-replication, triggering reanalysis of the initial pronoun in well-defined types of clauses as a non-referential element.

Keywords: expletives, pronouns, reference, pattern-replication, contact, syntax, Icelandic

References

- Booth, Hannah. 2018. *Expletives and Clause Structure: Syntactic Change in Icelandic*. PhD thesis, University of Manchester.
- Booth, Hannah. 2019. Cataphora, expletives and impersonal constructions in the history of Icelandic. *Nordic Journal of Linguistics. Special Issue: New Perspectives on Diachronic Syntax in North Germanic* 42(2), 139–164.
- Faarlund, Jan Terje. 1990. *Syntactic Change. Toward a Theory of Historical Syntax*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Falk, Cecilia. 1993. Non-referential subjects and agreement in the history of Swedish. *Lingua* 89:143-180.
- Heine, Bernd & Tania Kuteva. 2005. *Language Contact and Grammatical Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kinn, Kari. 2016. *Null Subjects in the History of Norwegian*. PhD thesis, University of Oslo.
- Matras, Yaron. 2009. *Language Contact*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rögnvaldsson, Eiríkur. 2002. *Það í fornu máli og síðar*. *Íslenskt mál* 24:37–69.
- Thráinsson, Höskuldur. 2007. *The syntax of Icelandic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wallenberg, Joel C., Anton Karl Ingason, Einar Freyr Sigurðsson & Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson. 2011. *Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC)*. Version 0.9. http://www.linguist.is/icelandic_treebank