

# Subject Float, Low Subject Trapping, and Case in Icelandic

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## Abstract

This paper describes and discusses two peculiar sets of (in)definiteness facts applying to subjects in Icelandic, here referred to as Subject Float and Low Subject Trapping. *Indefinite* subjects (commonly quantified) in presentational sentences and related clause types may either occupy the complement position within the predicate phrase or “float” or into various positions in the middle field. This is Subject Float, yielding variation such as “There would (many farmers) then (many farmers) probably (many farmers) be (?\*many farmers) elected (many farmers)”. Conversely, and unexpectedly, *definite* NP subjects of some adjectival and verbal predicates must stay in the complement position. This is Low Subject Trapping, yielding orders such as “there is cold radiator-the” and “there cooled radiator-the”. It is shown that the licensing of subject NPs in the various positions in Subject Float and in the complement position in Low Subject Trapping is unrelated to specific cases, thus refuting the widely adopted case approach to NP-licensing.

## 1. Introduction\*

The Definiteness Effect or the *Indefiniteness Requirement* (Thráinsson 2007) refers to the fact that “late subjects” or expletive associates must be indefinite in examples such as (1) and (2).

- (1) a. There is **a man** in the garden.  
b. \*There is **the man** in the garden.
- (2) a. There has probably been **a farmer** elected to the board.  
b. \*There has probably been **the farmer** elected to the board.

See Milsark (1977), Safir (1985), Belletti (1988), Lasnik (1992), among many. Sten Vikner discussed facts of this sort across Germanic and Romance at length in his Oxford volume on verb movement and expletive subjects (1995).

A peculiar fact is that English requires raising of the associate into the vicinity (or the “complement position”) of *be*, as illustrated in (3).

- (3) a. There has been **a car**<sub>i</sub> bought \_\_<sub>i</sub>.  
b. \*There has been bought a car.

As discussed by Vikner in his 1995 volume, the Scandinavian languages behave differently, allowing the associate to stay in the object position, as illustrated for Swedish in (4a) and for Icelandic in (4b).

- (4) a. Det har blivit köpt **en ny bil**.  
there has been bought a new car  
b. Það hefur verið keyptur **nýr bíll**.  
there have been bought new car  
Both: ‘There has been a new car bought.’

All the Scandinavian languages observe (a version of) the Indefiniteness Requirement, though. See (5a) for Swedish and (5b) for Icelandic.

- (5) a. \*Det har blivit köpt **bilen/den**.  
there has been bought car-the/it

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\* Acknowledgments:

- b. \*Það hefur verið keyptur bíllinn/hann.  
there has been bought car-the/he (= ‘it’)

The canonical declarative subject positions in Icelandic, as in other Scandinavian languages, are the preverbal position in direct word order (“John arrived yesterday”, “John had arrived yesterday”) or the position immediately following the finite verb in inverted orders (“Yesterday arrived John”, “Yesterday had John arrived”). However, Icelandic displays two sets of peculiar and poorly understood (in)definiteness facts applying to subjects. First, indefinite subjects can “float” and show up in various positions in the middle field above (to the left of) the vP or the predicate phrase.<sup>1</sup> Second, certain definite NP subjects must stay within the predicate phrase, a sort of an anti-definiteness effect. I refer to these phenomena as *Subject Float* and *Low Subject Trapping*. I will describe these phenomena here. Even though they have to some extent been discussed in the extensive literature on Icelandic syntax a more detailed and precise description is called for. I aim to provide such a description here.

As we will see, the described facts speak very clearly against the widely adopted assumption that specific cases (abstract or not) account for the positional licensing of NPs; in particular, it has been assumed that subjects move to the canonical subject position (Spec,IP) “in order” to get nominative case, overt or abstract. This assumption, *Vergnaud’s conjecture*, goes back to Jean-Roger Vergnaud’s famous 1977 letter to Chomsky and Lasnik and was developed in Chomsky’s *Lectures on government and binding* (1981). Possibly, though, NPs are partly licensed by having *some* case, regardless of which. However, that is a very general and vague idea, hard or impossible to test. Vergnaud’s conjecture, on the other hand, was a scientific hypothesis in the sense that it is possible to test. When put to a test, however, it fails. This has been argued previously by many, on the basis of Icelandic facts (see H. Sigurðsson 2012 and the references there). This article adds further evidence that Vergnaud’s conjecture was on the wrong track and must be rejected; an alternative account of NP-licensing must be sought for.

## 2. Subject Float

A well-known fact is that quantifiers can float, showing up in various positions in the clause (Sportiche 1988, Bošković 2004). This applies to clauses with all major types of verbs in Icelandic, including transitive, unergative, unaccusative/ergative, and passive verbs. I illustrate this for a passive predicate in (6) and (7).

- (6) a. **Allar** stelpurnar mundu þá sennilega hafa verið kosnar.  
all girls-the would then probably have been elected  
‘All the girls would then probably have been elected.’  
b. Stelpurnar mundu **allar** þá sennilega hafa verið kosnar.  
c. Stelpurnar mundu þá **allar** sennilega hafa verið kosnar.  
d. Stelpurnar mundu þá sennilega **allar** hafa verið kosnar.  
e. ?\* Stelpurnar mundu þá sennilega hafa **allar** verið kosnar.  
f. ?\* Stelpurnar mundu þá sennilega hafa verið **allar** kosnar.  
g. ?\* Stelpurnar mundu þá sennilega hafa verið kosnar **allar**.<sup>2</sup>

- (7) ... would 1\_\_ then 2\_\_ probably 3\_\_ have 4\_\_ been 5\_\_ elected 6\_\_  
ok ok ok ?\* ?\* ?\*

The potential positions between nonfinite verbs do not easily tolerate lexical material (with the partial exception of negative polarity items), so I will largely disregard these in the following. As for the sentence adverbials, one might want to assume that they come from another dimension than arguments

<sup>1</sup> The predicate phrase contains the main verb and its complements, plus non-finite auxiliaries, to the exclusion of sentence adverbials in the middle field. The boundary between the predicate phrase and the middle field is blurred by finite verb raising when the finite verb is the main verb. If we assume that auxiliaries are adjoined to vP, the predicate phrase is larger than vP, but if they are stacked little vs the resulting extended vP is equivalent with the predicate phrase (to the exclusion of the raised finite verb).

<sup>2</sup> The heavier quantifier *allar með tölu*, lit. “all in number”, meaning roughly ‘each and every(one)’, can be right adjoined to the vP or the clause (yielding the same surface order as (6g)). I set this aside.

and verbs, in a multi-dimensional approach to phrase structure (see the discussion in Bobaljik 1999, and the references there). I do not take a stand on this issue here. The only thing regarding sentence adverbials that matters for my purposes is that their order is strict, and that quantifiers and quantified subjects can be interspersed between them.

Indefinite subjects that contain a quantifier or consist of a bare quantifier show similar distributional properties as does the quantifier in (6). This is illustrated in (8) and (9).

- (8) a. Það mundu **margir bændur** þá sennilega verða kosnir í stjórnina.  
 there would many farmers then probably be(come) elected in board-the  
 ‘There would then probably be many farmers elected to the board.’  
 ‘Many farmers would then probably be elected to the board.’  
 b. Það mundu þá **margir bændur** sennilega verða kosnir í stjórnina.  
 c. Það mundu þá sennilega **margir bændur** verða kosnir í stjórnina.  
 d. ?\*Það mundu þá sennilega verða **margir bændur** kosnir í stjórnina.  
 e. Það mundu þá sennilega verða kosnir **margir bændur** í stjórnina.<sup>3</sup>
- (9) a. Það mundu **margir** þá sennilega verða kosnir í stjórnina.  
 ‘There would then probably be many elected to the board.’  
 ‘Many would then probably be elected to the board.’  
 b. Það mundu þá **margir** sennilega verða kosnir í stjórnina.  
 c. Það mundu þá sennilega **margir** verða kosnir í stjórnina.  
 d. ?\*Það mundu þá sennilega verða **margir** kosnir í stjórnina.  
 e. Það mundu þá sennilega verða kosnir **margir** í stjórnina.

Expletive *það* ‘there, it’ is not a subject in Icelandic but a placeholder in the C-domain (see Thráinsson 1979, Platzack 1983, and many others since, including Engdahl et al. 2018). According to the analysis in H. Sigurðsson (2010), the expletive is in the low C-domain in both main and subordinate clauses.<sup>4</sup> As we will see, Subject Float is independent of the presence of the expletive. The floating NP in Subject Float constructions is the subject.<sup>5</sup>

*Margir* in (9) and *margir bændur* in (8) may either have a specific or an unspecific reading. It is difficult to distinguish between these readings, but my intuition is that only the unspecific reading is available in (8e) and (9e), where the subject is in the object position. When the subject is in the highest position, as in (8a) and (9a), I only get the specific reading, while I get both readings for the middle field positions in the b- and c-examples.

Similar facts apply to some other quantifiers, including *nokkrir* ‘a few (people)’, *einhverjir* ‘some (people)’ and numerals like *fjórir* ‘four’, while other quantifiers, including *sumir* ‘some (people)’ and *allir* ‘everybody, all (people)’ behave slightly differently (bare *sumir* and *allir* are for example awkward in the object position).<sup>6</sup> I will not try to sort this out here; it would take us too far.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Margir bændur* can also be heavy NP-shifted to the right of the vP (or the clause), yielding the order “there would then probably be elected to board-the many farmers”. I set this aside. I am not concerned with transitive expletive constructions here (see, e.g., Thráinsson 2007), but they show largely similar patterns: “There would (many farmers) then (many farmers) probably (many farmers) have (\*many farmers) read (\*many farmers) book-the (?many farmers)”.

<sup>4</sup> It is often unclear whether to translate expletive *það* as ‘there’ or ‘it’ (and, more generally, how to translate Icelandic impersonal constructions). For simplicity, I consistently use ‘there’ in the glosses.

<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, one might want to assume that impersonal and presentational constructions have an expletive null-subject in Spec,vP that forms a chain with the overt subject NP (and presumably also with the expletive, when it is present, in the spirit of Safir 1985). I do not take a stand on this issue here but see Sigurðardóttir & Eythórsson (2017) and Wood (2017) for discussions of related ideas.

<sup>6</sup> Bare *margir* in (9e) is also a bit marked (while, e.g., *mjög margir* ‘very many’ feels entirely natural in the object position).

<sup>7</sup> Another complicating factor that I will not discuss here either is that the judgments change if one adds more sentence adverbials in the middle field, for example the hearsay evidentiality marker *víst* ‘they say, allegedly’ (yielding *þá \_\_ víst \_\_ sennilega \_\_*) and the negation *ekki* (yielding *þá (\_\_ víst) \_\_ sennilega \_\_ ekki \_\_*).

Bare indefinites behave differently from quantifier subjects; they are usually only “happy” in the object position, as illustrated in (10).

- (10) a. ??Það mundu **bændur** þá sennilega verða kosnir í stjórnina.  
           there would farmers then probably be(come) elected in board-the  
           Intended: ‘Some (unspecific) farmers would then be elected to the board.’  
       b. ?\*Það mundu þá **bændur** sennilega verða kosnir í stjórnina.  
       c. ?\*Það mundu þá sennilega **bændur** verða kosnir í stjórnina.  
       d. ?\*Það mundu þá sennilega verða **bændur** kosnir í stjórnina.  
       e. Það mundu þá sennilega verða kosnir **bændur** í stjórnina.

Much the same applies to indefinite subjects that are modified by an adjective, such as *duglegir bændur* ‘efficient farmers’, *gamlir bændur* ‘old farmers’.<sup>8</sup>

The basic structure of vPs in languages like English and the Germanic VO languages is commonly assumed to be as sketched in (11).

- (11) [<sub>VP</sub> Spec(ifier) v [<sub>VP</sub> V Compl(ement)]]

Subjects of unaccusatives and passives are taken to be generated in the complement position, to the right of the main verb. Transitive subjects, in turn, are assumed to be generated in the specifier position, Spec,vP, that is, the position to the immediate left of the main verb. However, as in many other languages (see Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 2001), transitive subjects are not usually allowed to surface in Spec,vP in Icelandic. This is illustrated in (12).

- (12) a. Það mundu **margir (bændur)** hafa keypt bókina.  
           there would many (farmers) have bought book-the  
           ‘Many (farmers) would have bought the book.’  
           ‘There are many (farmers) who have bought the book.’  
       b. \*Það mundu hafa **margir (bændur)** keypt bókina.  
           there would have many (farmers) bought book-the

Quantifiers and quantified subjects are usually not “happy” in Spec,vP in passives and unaccusatives either. We see this in the passives in (8d), (9d), and (10d) above, and we see the same for the unaccusative *hverfa* ‘disappear’ in (13d).

- (13) a. Það mundu **margir bílar** þá sennilega hafa horfið.  
           there would many cars then probably have disappeared  
           ‘Probably, many cars would then have disappeared.’  
       b. Það mundu þá **margir bílar** sennilega hafa horfið.  
       c. Það mundu þá sennilega **margir bílar** hafa horfið.  
       d. ?\* Það mundu þá sennilega hafa **margir bílar** horfið.  
       e. Það mundu þá sennilega hafa horfið **margir bílar**.

However, negative polarity items behave differently. They are relatively “comfortable” in Spec,vP, in particular if they are focalized.<sup>9</sup> See (14).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> However, in clauses with *vera* ‘be’ as the main verb, adjectival modification has grammaticality effects. See the discussion in Thráinsson (2007:318–322) of the different behavior of *köttur* ‘a cat’ vs. *svartur köttur* ‘a black cat’.

<sup>9</sup> This is marked, though. In all three examples in (14) the order “there would then probably not any farmers have ...”, with “any farmers” in the middle field, is more natural (and does not require strong focus). Also, *neinir* alone is ungrammatical in Spec,vP (“\*there would then probably not have any bought book-the”, etc.). The facts in (14) might relate to the fact that negative objects are commonly raised in the Scandinavian languages (see Thráinsson 2007:82 ff. and the references there), yielding orders like “I have no books bought”.

<sup>10</sup> More generally, the negation affects judgments of Subject Float clauses (see H. Sigurðsson 2000:83), but, as this is presumably due to independent scope effects (rather than the float itself), I set it aside.

- (14) a. ?*Það mundu þá sennilega ekki hafa NEINIR bændur keypt bókina.*  
 there would then probably not have any farmers bought book-the  
 ‘Probably, no farmers would then have bought the book.’  
 ‘Probably, the book would then not have been bought by any farmers.’  
 b. *Það mundu þá sennilega ekki hafa verið NEINIR bændur kosnir.*  
 there would then probably not have been any farmers elected  
 ‘Probably, there would then not have been any farmers elected.’  
 c. *Það mundu þá sennilega ekki hafa NEINIR bílar horfið.*  
 there would then probably not have any cars disappeared  
 ‘Probably, no cars would then have disappeared.’

Spec,vP is commonly accessible for indefinite subjects in passives in for example English and Swedish (usually under a participle number agreement condition in the latter, see Holmberg 2002). The limited access of floating quantifiers and indefinite subjects to Spec,vP in Icelandic is curious.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, indefinite subjects cannot usually raise into the middle field, that is, the postverbal I-domain, in English and Swedish, as opposed to Icelandic (see, e.g., Engdahl et al. 2018).<sup>12</sup> I set these differences aside here.

The Subject Float examples we have looked at so far have the expletive *það* in initial position. However, Icelandic Subject Float is largely independent of the expletive, and, more generally, of the initial position. I illustrate this for only the lowest I-domain position in (15); the sentence in (15c) is a narrative style verb-initial declarative (see H. Sigurðsson 1990, 2018).

- (15) a. *Því mundu þá kannski margir bændur verða kosnir í stjórnina.*  
 thus would then perhaps many farmers be elected in board-the  
 ‘Thus, there would perhaps be many farmers elected to the board.’  
 b. *Mundu þá kannski margir bændur verða kosnir í stjórnina?*  
 ‘Would there then perhaps be many farmers elected to the board?’  
 c. *Mundu því kannski margir bændur verða kosnir í stjórnina.*  
 ‘Thus, there would perhaps be many farmers elected to the board.’  
 d. *... að þá mundu kannski margir bændur verða kosnir í stjórnina.*  
 ... that then would perhaps many farmers be elected in board-the  
 ‘... that there would then perhaps be many farmers elected to the board.’

Now, reconsider (8), repeated here as (16).

- (16) a. *Það mundu margir bændur þá sennilega verða kosnir í stjórnina.*  
 there would many farmers then probably be(come) elected in board-the  
 ‘There would then probably be many farmers elected to the board.’  
 ‘Many farmers would then probably be elected to the board.’  
 b. *Það mundu þá margir bændur sennilega verða kosnir í stjórnina.*  
 c. *Það mundu þá sennilega margir bændur verða kosnir í stjórnina.*  
 d. ?\**Það mundu þá sennilega verða margir bændur kosnir í stjórnina.*  
 e. *Það mundu þá sennilega verða kosnir margir bændur í stjórnina.*

- (17) ... would 1\_\_ then 2\_\_ probably 3\_\_ be(come) 4\_\_ elected 5\_\_ to board-the  
                   ok           ok           ok                   ?\*           ok

<sup>11</sup> One could say that the participle has an EPP [Extended Projection Principle] feature in English and Swedish, attracting the subject into Spec,vP, while Icelandic lacks such a feature (see Holmberg 2002). However, unless one has a general theory of EPP, that is just a restatement of the facts.

<sup>12</sup> “I” in “I-domain” refers to Infl, the position of the finite verb (when it does not raise to C). The postverbal I-domain is the space between the finite verb and the highest or the first non-finite verb. In “there would then probably not many farmers be elected to board-the”, “then”, “probably”, “not”, and “many farmers” are all in the postverbal I-domain, while “be”, “elected”, and “to board-the” are within the predicate phrase.

It is unclear, to say the least, what licenses all these potential indefinite quantified subject positions (or quantifier subject positions, cf. (9)). Subject Float is at least partly semantically and syntactically regulated, relating to specificity, but the effects are vague and unclear. Partly, the variation seems to be due to mere “PF sloppiness”.<sup>13</sup> In particular, there are no clear reading differences between the low I-domain positions.<sup>14</sup> There is a slight preference for a specific reading in (16b), “there would then many farmers probably”, and a slight preference for an unspecific reading in (16c), “there would then probably many farmers”, but, as far as I can judge, both readings are possible in both positions.

The Subject Float facts are unrelated to specific cases. The floating subject is nominative in all the examples we have looked at so far, but quirky (non-nominative) subjects behave the same.<sup>15</sup> This is illustrated for the dative subject *mörgum bændum* in (18).<sup>16</sup>

- (18) a. Það mundi **mörgum bændum** þá sennilega verða bjargað.  
 there would many farmers.DAT then probably be(come) rescued  
 ‘There would then probably be many farmers rescued.’  
 ‘Many farmers would then probably be rescued.’  
 b. Það mundi þá **mörgum bændum** sennilega verða bjargað.  
 c. Það mundi þá sennilega **mörgum bændum** verða bjargað.  
 d. ?\*Það mundi þá sennilega verða **mörgum bændum** bjargað.  
 e. Það mundi þá sennilega verða bjargað **mörgum bændum**.

Since Chomsky 1981, it has been widely assumed that subject movement to Spec,IP, as in *The farmers would then probably be rescued*, is triggered by abstract nominative case (“Case”). Full NPs in English have no morphologically visible case, but they might well have abstract case; abstract case in the sense “covert but active case” is arguably a fact (see, e.g., Sigurðsson 2008, Wood 2017). However, definite subjects move to Spec,IP in Icelandic, much as in English, but this applies to quirky subjects as well as nominative ones: *Bændunum*.DAT *mundi þá sennilega verða bjargað* ‘The farmers would then probably be rescued’ vs. *\*Þá mundi sennilega verða bjargað bændunum*.DAT (see Andrews 1976, Thráinsson 1979 and many others since). On the face of it, this would seem to disprove that subject movement to Spec,IP is triggered by abstract nominative case. One might think that it is possible to get around this problem, though, and thereby save the abstract nominative case trigger hypothesis, by assuming that quirky subjects in Spec,IP are assigned invisible abstract nominative case, on top of the quirky case (see Jónsson 1996, and also the critical discussion in Thráinsson 2007:192 ff.). However, this has no bearing on the Subject Float facts.<sup>17</sup> Floating subjects can show up in a number of positions in the middle field, below Spec,IP, and also in the complement position, regardless of case. If abstract nominative case were the factor that licenses subjects in all these positions, then such case would either have multiple sources within the clause or be able to percolate rather freely down the whole clausal structure, which in turn would mean that abstract nominative case has zero explanatory value with regard to NP-licensing. It would be available in multiple positions, hence unavailable as an explanation or an account of where subjects can be spelled out.

<sup>13</sup> Quite possibly, though, there are some intonation correlates. It would be interesting to test this.

<sup>14</sup> The high I-domain position is the position immediately following the finite verb in main clauses, occupied by definite subjects in inverted orders, as in “Then would farmers-the probably have been elected”, and by indefinite subjects in orders like “There would many farmers then probably have been elected”. The other positions in the I-domain are low(er) I-domain positions. These are entirely descriptive terms; the high I-domain positions in inverted orders and in presentational sentences are probably distinct (this has been debated, but I set it aside here).

<sup>15</sup> As has been repeatedly pointed out in previous work (H. Sigurðsson 1989, 2000, etc.). Icelandic quirky subjects have been widely discussed. See for example Thráinsson (2007), H. Sigurðsson (2012), and the references cited in these works.

<sup>16</sup> Parallel facts are found for (much rarer) genitive subjects: “There would (many farmers.GEN) then (many farmers.GEN) probably (many farmers.GEN) be (?\*many farmers.GEN) missed (many farmers.GEN).”

<sup>17</sup> Nominative objects and agreement with such objects, as in “Me.DAT would.3PL like these horses.NOM”, ‘I would like these horses’, also pose a problem for the abstract nominative case approach (H. Sigurðsson 1996 and much subsequent work, see Thráinsson 2007:232 ff. and the references there).

In general, argument licensing in Icelandic is not affected by specific cases (see H. Sigurðsson 1989, 2008, 2012, and the references there). Subject Float does not have any clear A-bar properties either, even though it sometimes relates to focus. It is an intriguing phenomenon.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Low Subject Trapping

Definite subjects are excluded in Subject Float constructions. See (19).

- (19) a. \*Það mundu **bændurnir** þá sennilega verða kosnir í stjórnina.  
           there would farmers-the then probably be(come) elected in board-the  
       b. \*Það mundu þá **bændurnir** sennilega verða kosnir í stjórnina.  
       c. \*Það mundu þá sennilega **bændurnir** verða kosnir í stjórnina.  
       d. \*Það mundu þá sennilega verða **bændurnir** kosnir í stjórnina.  
       e. \*Það mundu þá sennilega verða kosnir **bændurnir** í stjórnina.

However, Icelandic displays a number of exceptions from the Indefiniteness Requirement, discussed by Thráinsson (2007:317 ff.; see also Rögnvaldsson 1982 [1990], 1984, H. Sigurðsson 1989, Jónsson 2000, 2005, Vangsnes 2002, Indriðadóttir 2014, Engdahl et al. 2018). One is that definite subjects quantified by *all*- ‘all, every’ are well-formed in the high and low I-domain (Vangsnes 2002, Thráinsson 2007), but ungrammatical within the predicate phrase, as illustrated in (20).<sup>19</sup>

- (20) a. Það mundu **allir bændurnir** þá sennilega hafa verið kosnir.  
           there would all farmers-the then probably have been elected  
       b. ?Það mundu þá **allir bændurnir** sennilega hafa verið kosnir.  
       c. Það mundu þá sennilega **allir bændurnir** hafa verið kosnir.  
       d. \*Það mundu þá sennilega hafa **allir bændurnir** verið kosnir.  
       e. \*Það mundu þá sennilega hafa verið kosnir **allir bændurnir**.

The expletive does not seem to be responsible for these patterns. See (21) and the narrative style V1 declaratives in (22).

- (21) a. Þá mundu sennilega **allir bændurnir** hafa verið kosnir.  
           ‘Then all the farmers would probably have been elected.’  
       b. \*Þá mundu sennilega hafa verið kosnir **allir bændurnir**.
- (22) a. Mundu því sennilega **allir bændurnir** hafa verið kosnir.  
           ‘Thus, all the farmers would probably have been elected.’  
       b. \*Mundu því sennilega hafa verið kosnir **allir bændurnir**.

As seen, these *all*-definites behave partly like plain definites and partly like indefinites. Like plain or bare definites they cannot stay within the predicate phrase, but like indefinites they are licensed in the I-domain.

Another interesting type of exceptions from the Indefiniteness Requirement is illustrated in (23) (see H. Sigurðsson 1989, Jónsson 2000, 2005, Thráinsson 2007, Indriðadóttir 2014). I refer to this

<sup>18</sup> The high subject position and the object position are also available for indefinite subjects in both regular ECM and experiencer ECM in Icelandic. Regular ECM: “I believed many farmers.ACC have been elected”, and “I believed have been elected many **farmers.ACC**”. Experiencer ECM: “Me.DAT seemed many farmers.NOM have been elected”, and “Me.DAT seemed have been elected many **farmers.NOM**”. In contrast, definite subjects are licit in only the high subject position of both types of ECM infinitives (the Definiteness Effect). These facts speak strongly against a case-related approach to argument licensing. I must set this aside here, though, but see H. Sigurðsson (2012).

<sup>19</sup> *Flestir* ‘most’ and definite partitives, such as *tveir af bændunum*.DAT, *tveir bændurnir*.NOM, *tveir bæðanna*.GEN ‘two of the farmers’, behave similarly.

construction as *Low Subject Trapping*, **LST**, as it has definite NP-subjects that are stuck or trapped within the predicate phrase, an issue I will return to shortly.<sup>20</sup>

- (23) a. Það er búin mjólkin.  
there is finished milk-the  
'There is no more milk (here)'  
'The milk has run out'.  
b. Það er kaldur ofninn.  
there is cold radiator-the  
'The radiator is cold.'  
c. Það er brotinn diskurinn.  
there is broken plate-the  
'The plate is broken.'  
d. Það var bilaður skjárinna.<sup>21</sup>  
there was broken monitor-the  
'The monitor was out of order.'  
e. Það var bráðnaður snjórinn.  
there was melted snow-the  
'The snow had melted.'

LST is colloquial, and it is marked. In an informant survey (with 710 and 709 informants, respectively), the sentences in (23a) and (23d) were accepted by only 18% and 34%, respectively (and rejected by 64% and 45%, respectively). See Þráinsson et al. (2015:84). LST sentences express some previously unknown event (often unexpected but likely to happen in a given situation), and the subject must be non-topical (i.e., it must not have been spelled out in previous discourse). Thus, in the context "We checked both the stove and the radiator" one could not proceed by saying *Það var kaldur ofninn* "there was cold oven-the" (one would have to say *Ofninn var kaldur* in that case). In the present tense, as in (23a), (23b), and (23c), LST sentences often initiate discourse. I could for example go into the kitchen and open the refrigerator to discover that there is no more milk there and then state (23a) to my partner. Alternatively, if my partner were to ask me 'What is the matter?' I could naturally answer with (23a) (or, in different situations, with (23b) or (23c)). It is thus difficult to create a natural context for present tense LST in a written informant survey. However, this does not extend to the past tense. The past tense sentences in (23d) and (23e) must be part of a larger discourse, where the background of the previously unknown event has been laid. For the sentence in (24d), the context was *Ég komst ekki í tölvuna* 'I could not get into the computer' (Þráinsson et al. 2015:78). I will not speculate further on why so many informants in Þráinsson et al. (2015) rejected LST sentences. The above-cited Icelandic linguists, who have discussed LST, all agree that many LST sentences are fully natural. The following discussion is based on my own intuitions. As far as I can judge, these intuitions are shared by many other speakers.

LST is constrained in various ways. First, it is incompatible with individual level predicates (i.e., predicates that describe permanent properties of the subject): *??Það er stór skjárinna* "there is big monitor-the", etc. (Jónsson 2005:457). Second, the subject cannot easily be animate, even with stage level predicates (describing non-permanent properties). See (24).<sup>22</sup>

- (24) a. \*Það er veikur kennarinn.  
there is sick teacher-the

<sup>20</sup> A related but a slightly different type pointed out by Rögnvaldsson (1982 [1990], 1984) is cases like "there shines always blessed **sun-the**", "there got-stuck **bus-the** on its way to the north", and "there is come **guy-the** who you met yesterday". See also H. Sigurðsson (1989:294–295), and Thráinsson (2007:325).

<sup>21</sup> I find this less natural for plural subjects: *?Það eru kaldir ofnarnir* "there are cold the radiators", *?Það voru bilaðir skjáirnir* "there were broken monitors-the". However, if the plural subjects are quantified by *all-* 'all, every', *flest-* 'most', or *báð-* 'both', this becomes quite natural: *Það eru kaldir allir/flestir/báðir ofnarnir*, *Það voru bilaðir allir/flestir/báðir skjáirnir*. Perhaps, increased heaviness or focus is a contributing factor here.

<sup>22</sup> However, I find *?Sjáðu, það er grár kötturinn* "Look, there is gray cat-the" much better than *\*Sjáðu, það er grár maðurinn* "Look, there is gray man-the", even though it seems natural to interpret *grár* 'gray' here as an individual level predicate rather than as a stage level predicate.



- b. \*Það er fótbrottinn hesturinn.  
there is leg-broken horse-the
- c. \*Það er reiður strákurinn.  
there is angry boy-the

Third, the construction commonly requires clause-initial *það* in declaratives, as opposed to questions. See (25). In certain contexts, however, this requirement is lifted, see (25c).

- (25) a. ?? Nú er búin mjólkinn. (OK: Nú er mjólkinn búin)  
now is finished milk-the
- b. ?? Þá var bilaður skjárinn. (OK: Þá var skjárinn bilaður)  
then was broken monitor-the
- c. Ég ætlaði að nota tölvuna en þá var bilaður skjárinn.  
I intended to use computer-the but then was broken monitor-the  
'I intended to use the computer, but then the monitor was out of order.'
- d. Er búin mjólkinn?  
is finished milk-the  
'Is there no more milk here.'
- e. Var bilaður skjárinn?  
was broken monitor-the  
'Was the monitor out of order?'

Fourth, LST is mainly found in the simple tenses, present and past. As we will see, it is sometimes grammatical in complex tenses (present and past perfects, etc.), but often it is less natural than in the simple tenses. See (26).

- (26) a. ? Það hefur sennilega verið búin mjólkinn.  
there has probably been finished milk-the
- b. ?? Það hafði sennilega verið bilaður skjárinn.  
there had probably been broken monitor-the

Fifth, the subject must be a definite full NP. It cannot be an indefinite NP, nor can it be a pronoun. See (27).

- (27) a. \*Það er búin mjólk/hún.  
there is finished milk/she (= 'it')
- b. \*Það er kaldur ofn/hann.<sup>23</sup>  
there is cold (a) radiator/he (= 'it')

Sixth, and most symptomatically, the subject is trapped within the predicate phrase; it cannot raise or float into the middle field. See (28) and (29).

- (28) a. \*Það er mjólkinn búin.  
there is milk-the finished
- b. \*Það er bíllinn bilaður.  
there is car-the broken
- (29) a. ? Það hefur sennilega verið búin mjólkinn. = (26a)  
there has probably been finished milk-the
- b. \*Það hefur sennilega verið mjólkinn búin.
- c. \*Það hefur sennilega mjólkinn verið búin.
- d. \*Það hefur mjólkinn sennilega verið búin.

<sup>23</sup> The indefinite NP is grammatical in a presentational sentence with a stage setting adverbial (cf. Milsark 1977): *Það er kaldur ofn í húsinu* "there is (a) cold radiator in house-the".

The examples in (23)–(29) all have an adjectival predicate. LST is also found for unaccusative and ergative verbs. See (30).<sup>24</sup>

- (30) a. Það klárast mjólkinn (ef þú drekkur hana alla).  
there gets-finished milk-the (if you drink it all)  
‘The milk will run out (if you drink it all).’  
b. Það slokknar ljósið (ef þú gerir þetta).  
there goes-out light-the (if you do this)  
‘The light will go out (if you do this).’  
c. Það kólnaði ofninn.  
there cooled radiator-the  
‘The radiator got cold(er).’  
d. Það bilaði skjárin.  
there broke monitor-the  
‘The monitor went out of order.’  
e. Það bráðnaði ísinn.  
there melted ice-the  
‘The ice/ice-cream melted.’  
f. Það brotnaði diskurinn.  
there broke plate-the  
‘The plate broke.’  
g. Það rifnaði pokinn.  
there tore bag-the  
‘The bag burst.’  
g. Það lagaðist veðrið.  
there got-better weather-the  
‘The weather got better.’

Inasmuch as verbal LST is compatible with the complex tenses, it can be shown that the subject must not raise into the I-domain. See (31).

- (31) a. ?Það hefur sennilega bilað **skjárin**.  
there has probably broken monitor-the  
b. \*Það hefur sennilega **skjárinn** bilað.  
c. \*Það hefur **skjárinn** sennilega bilað.

Unintentional causers in Icelandic are commonly expressed in *hjá*- ‘by/at’ phrases (Wood 2013; the preposition *hjá* takes a dative complement). *Hjá*-phrases can also denote a possessor (E. Sigurðsson 2006, Þráinsson et al. 2015) or a location. If such a phrase is added to (31a), the clause gains in acceptability (and so do clauses with other complex tenses).<sup>25</sup> As shown in (32), the subject can either follow or precede the *hjá*-phrase.

- (32) a. Það hefur sennilega bilað hjá henni **skjárinn**.

<sup>24</sup> In some cases of this sort (as in, e.g., “there broke plate-the”) there is an innocence indication: “I am not responsible, it just happened/happens.”

<sup>25</sup> For example, clauses with future *mun* ‘will’ and the complex future *koma til með að* ‘will’, lit. “come to with to”. See (i) for the latter.

- (i) a. Það kemur til með að kólna hjá þér **ofninn**.  
there comes to with to cool by you.DAT radiator-the  
‘The radiator at your place will get cold(er).’  
‘The radiator will get cold(er) on you.’  
‘Your radiator will get cold(er).’  
b. Það kemur til með að kólna **ofninn** hjá þér.

there has probably broken by her.DAT monitor-the  
 ‘The monitor has probably broken down on her.’  
 ‘Her monitor has probably broken down.’  
 ‘She has probably unintentionally caused the/her monitor to break down.’

- b. Það hefur sennilega bilað **skjárinn** hjá henni,

The order in (32b) is slightly more marked than the one in (32a), but both are grammatical.

This pattern is found for simple tense verbal and adjectival LST as well, as illustrated in (33) and (34).

- (33) a. Það kólnaði hjá mér **ofninn**.  
 there cooled by me.DAT radiator-the  
 ‘The radiator at my place got cold(er).’  
 ‘The radiator got cold(er) on me.’  
 ‘My radiator got cold(er).’  
 b. Það kólnaði **ofninn** hjá mér.
- (34) a. Það er kaldur hjá mér **ofninn**.  
 there is cold by me.DAT radiator-the  
 ‘The radiator at my place is cold.’  
 ‘The radiator is (being) cold on me.’  
 ‘My radiator is cold.’  
 b. Það er kaldur **ofninn** hjá mér.’

The *b*-examples in (32)–(34) might involve raising of the subject within the predicate phrase. Alternatively, the *a*-examples might involve raising of the *hjá*-phrase, or there might be two distinct base structures. I will not try to sort this out here (but see Wood 2013 for a discussion of the syntax of clauses with *hjá*-phrases). In any case, neither the subject nor the *hjá*-phrase can move into the I-domain. See (35) and (36).

- (35) a. Það hefur sennilega bilað **skjárinn** hjá henni. = (32b)  
 b. \*Það hefur sennilega **skjárinn** bilað hjá henni.  
 c. \*Það hefur **skjárinn** sennilega bilað hjá henni.
- (36) a. Það hefur sennilega bilað **hjá henni** skjárinn. = (32a)  
 b. \*Það hefur sennilega **hjá henni** bilað skjárinn.  
 c. \*Það hefur **hjá henni** sennilega bilað skjárinn.

The *hjá*-phrases have a special status. Other PPs cannot normally precede the subject in LST, see (37) and (38).

- (37) a. Það kólnaði ofninn **í stofunni**.  
 there cooled radiator-the in living.room-the  
 ‘The radiator in the living room got cold(er).’  
 b. \*Það kólnaði **í stofunni** ofninn.
- (38) a. Það kólnaði ofninn **í morgun**.  
 there cooled radiator-the in morning  
 ‘The radiator got cold(er) this morning.’  
 b. \*Það kólnaði **í morgun** ofninn.

All the LST examples we have looked at so far have nominative subjects, but there are also cases of verbal LST with quirky subjects.<sup>26</sup> See (39).

- (39) a. Það seinkar **fluginu**.  
 there delays flight-the.DAT  
 ‘The flight will be late.’  
 b. Það verður flýtt **klukkunni** á morgun.  
 there will.be speeded clock-the.DAT on tomorrow  
 ‘The clock will be speeded up tomorrow.’  
 c. Það fækkar alltaf **ferðunum**.  
 there get.fewer always trips-the.DAT  
 ‘The trips are getting fewer all the time.’

Finally, both nominative and quirky subjects are possible in some LST “nonraising raising infinitives”, as in (40).<sup>27</sup>

- (40) a. Það virðist vera kaldur ofninn.  
 there seems be cold radiator-the.NOM  
 ‘The radiator seems to be cold.’  
 b. Það virðist hafa seinkað fluginu.  
 there seems have delayed flight-the.DAT  
 ‘The flight seems to be/have been late.’

This (almost) completes my description of LST. It is the most detailed description of the phenomenon to date, but I am keenly aware of the fact that I have not developed any theoretical account of it. The obligatory trapping of the definite subject within the predicate phrase is particularly intriguing. It might be related to two other phenomena, the (non-standard) *New Passive* and the *Ergative-Impersonal Alternation*.<sup>28</sup> In both these phenomena, definite NPs that are potential subject candidates must stay within the predicate phrase. Consider the New Passive first (see E. Sigurðsson 2017:208 ff. and the references there, including Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002). It is illustrated in (41b) and (41c), in comparison with the standard or traditional passive in (41a); as shown in (41d) and (42e), the accusative NP cannot raise into the I-domain. DFT = a default, nonagreeing N.SG form.<sup>29</sup>

- (41) a. Kennarinn var rekinn.  
 teacher-the.NOM was fired.NOM.M.SG  
 ‘The teacher was fired.’  
 b. Það var rekið **kennarann**.  
 there was fired.DFT teacher-the.ACC  
 ‘The teacher was fired.’  
 ‘Somebody/They fired the teacher.’  
 c. Var rekið **kennarann**?  
 d. \*Það var **kennarann** rekið.  
 e. \*Var **kennarann** rekið?

<sup>26</sup> Quirky subjects of predicative adjectives (as in *Mér er kalt* ‘me is cold’, ‘I am cold’) are confined to animate experiencers. As the subject in LST cannot easily be animate, there are no cases of adjectival LST with quirky subjects.

<sup>27</sup> This is excluded in PRO infinitives but only marginally degraded in passive *það*-initial ECM constructions: *?Það var talinn vera kaldur ofninn* ‘there was believed be cold radiator-the.NOM’.

<sup>28</sup> Yet another phenomenon that might be related to LST is the so-called Impersonal Modal Construction, as in *Nú/Það verður að banna þessa hegðun*.ACC ‘Now/There must to forbid this behavior’ ‘This behavior must be forbidden (now)’ (see H. Sigurðsson 1989, Wood 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Parallel patterns are found for datives: *Það var boðið kennaranum* ‘there was invited teacher-the.DAT’ vs. *\*Það var kennaranum boðið* ‘there was teacher-the.DAT invited’, etc.

The Ergative-Impersonal Alternation is illustrated in (42) (for further discussion see H. Sigurðsson 1989:236–237, 289–292). The ergative version in (42a) has regular NP-movement to subject, whereas the impersonal version in (42b) and (42c) has the NP embedded in a preposition phrase; as shown in (42d) and (42e), the preposition NP complement cannot raise into the I-domain.

- (42) a. Kertið slokknaði.  
candle-the.NOM went.out  
‘The candle went out.’  
b. Það slokknaði á kertinu.  
there went.out on candle-the.DAT  
‘The candle went out.’  
c. Slokknaði á kertinu?  
d. \*Það slokknaði kertinu á.  
e. \*Slokknaði kertinu á?

In both the New Passive and the impersonal PP clauses, though, the low NP is assigned case within the predicate phrase, so its inability to raise into the I-domain might be taken to be an instantiation of (criterial) freezing in the sense of Chomsky (2001:6) or Rizzi (e.g., 2007), saying roughly that an NP that has checked all its features (case, etc.) gets frozen in place and cannot move any further (a reasonable conjecture). The trapping of the subject in LST relates to information structure; as we have seen the trapped subject must not be topical. Its position might be a criterial focus position, for a non-topical but a situation-given subject, but it is difficult to find any evidence bearing on the issue, apart from or in addition to the trapping itself. In any event, the subject is commonly nominative in LST, so, on widely adopted approaches to NP-movement (e.g., Chomsky 1981), it “should” move into the I-domain to get its case checked in a (more) local relation to Infl. We must conclude that LST is unrelated to specific cases – something different from case is responsible for the trapping. In addition, as we saw in section 2, Subject Float is unrelated to case. In Subject Float, the indefinite subject may raise out of the predicate phrase into the I-domain, but the float applies to subject NPs regardless of their case marking.

A very sharp difference between the New Passive and the impersonal PP clauses on one hand and LST on the other hand is that the predicate phrase internal argument can easily be a pronoun in the former but not in the latter. See the contrasts between (43) and (44).

- |         |  |                      |
|---------|--|----------------------|
| (43) a. | Það var rekið hana.<br>there was fired her<br>‘She was fired.’<br>‘Somebody/They fired her.’ | New Passive          |
| b.      | Það slokknaði á því.<br>there went-out on it<br>‘It went out.’                               | Impersonal PP clause |
| (44) a. | *Það er kaldur hann.<br>there is cold he (= ‘it’)  | Adjectival LST       |
| b.      | *Það kólnaði hann.<br>there cooled he (= ‘it’)   | Verbal LST           |

This sharp difference has gone unnoticed hitherto, for example in my own works. In Sigurðsson (2010), I treated definite NPs on a par with pronouns. Although treating pronouns and definite full NPs alike might be sufficient for English it is evidently not accurate enough for Icelandic. A possible line of reasoning here is that, when not “shielded” by a preposition, pronouns in non-transitive constructions differ from full NPs in that they must be in the vicinity of Person checking features in the C-domain, an effect that has commonly, and misleadingly, been attributed to case or to the Extended Projection Principle (see H. Sigurðsson 2010, 2012, 2014). I leave it at that.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

In this article I have described and discussed two sets of perplexing and poorly understood (in)definiteness facts in Icelandic, Low Subject Trapping, applying to some definite subjects, and Subject Float, applying to indefinite subjects in presentational (and related) constructions. The facts described here show that some definite subjects must be spelled out in the complement position within the predicate phrase and that indefinite subjects can be spelled out in a number of positions in the middle field, above the predicate (in addition to the complement position). The licensing of subject NPs in the various positions is unrelated to specific cases, thus speaking loud and clearly against the assumption (Vergnaud's conjecture) in Chomsky (1981) and much subsequent writings that case plays an essential role in NP-licensing. Case marking and case agreement in Icelandic infinitives also demonstrate very clearly that the assumption is unfounded (see H. Sigurðsson 2008, 2012, and the references there). It is difficult to test this assumption in languages such as English, with barely any case marking, but it can be tested in Icelandic, and the results are unequivocal: Case does not account for argument licensing.

In all fairness, it must be added that Chomsky has abandoned his original "case story", albeit only reluctantly in passing ("Case assignment is divorced from movement", 2001:17). However, the field has not followed in his footsteps (see, e.g., Lasnik 2008, Legate 2008). A much weaker approach, in the spirit of Sapir (1921), might be upheld, namely, that cased NPs are partly licensed by having *some* case, regardless of which, but that is a vague statement, with limited predictive power. Nominative case, abstract or not, is unrelated to subject licensing in Spec,IP, which instead seems to boil down to Person matching (H. Sigurðsson 2010, 2012, 2014).

If linguistics were like the natural sciences, Vergnaud's conjecture would have been generally discarded a long time ago, and the whole field would be looking for alternative accounts of NP-licensing. Unfortunately, that is not the case, but hopefully it will be.

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