

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287812631>

From Comparative to Relativizer: The Case of Iceland Sem

Article · June 2014

DOI: 10.3765/bls.v10i0.1933

CITATIONS

0

READS

18

1 author:



[Suzanne Kemmer](#)

Rice University

24 PUBLICATIONS 426 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Fictive motion [View project](#)

From Comparative to Relativizer: The Case of Iceland Sem

Author(s): Suzanne E. Kemmer

Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1984), pp. 296-306

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

From Comparative to Relativizer:
The Case of Icelandic Sem*

Suzanne E. Kemmer
Stanford University

A substantive theory of linguistic change must begin with consideration of what Weinreich, Labov & Herzog (1968:101) call the constraints question. In its most basic form, this may be phrased as follows: First, what are the conditions for a potential linguistic change in a structure of a given type; and secondly, once these conditions are met, what are the possible changes that may occur? This paper examines a linguistic change in Icelandic and the other Scandinavian languages, in which the old pan-Nordic relativizer er (inherited from Common Germanic) was replaced, within historic times, with a new relative particle, sem. What is interesting about this change from a typological point of view is the unusual historical source of the new relativizer: While the most common sources for new relative markers, cross-linguistically, are the demonstrative and interrogative systems (cf. developments in W. Germanic languages, eg. Gn. der, Eng. which), relative sem originated as a comparative particle meaning 'as' or 'like'. Examples (1)a and b, from Old Icelandic (OI, 1100-1400) illustrate the use of sem in comparative constructions:

- | | |
|---|--|
| (1)a. rauðr <u>sem</u> bláð
red as blood
'red as blood' | b. svá vitran mann <u>sem</u> þú ert
so wise man as you are
'as wise a man as you are' |
|---|--|
- (Cleasby 1957:522)

In examining the shift of sem to a relativizer in the history of Icelandic (Icel.), I address the following questions: 1) In what way is this change understandable in light of what we know about linguistic change; and 2) What do the answers to this question allow us to predict with regard to the potential of comparative particles, across languages, to be a possible source for new relativizers?

1. Historical evidence for the change

The written history of Icel. shows three stages in the change of sem to a relativizer (REL). In the first, er is the only REL in use, as evidenced by two early texts: a) the linguistically archaic poetic Edda [1], and b) the Libellus Islandorum (LIB), by Ari Þorgilsson (citations and line numbers from Hermannsson 1930). LIB (sometimes called Íslendingabók), is both the earliest composed (ca. 1120) as well as the most reliably transmitted of the surviving Icel. prose texts (cf. Hermannsson 1930:intro). As a prose text, it is preferable to the poetic Edda as a source of examples illustrating the uses of er at Stage I of the change.[2] Example (2) illustrates a relative construction (RC) from this first stage.

- (2) Eirkr inn rauði hét maðr breiðfirzkr er
 Erik the red was-called man Broadfjorder REL
 frá þá hðan þangat ok nðm þar land
 went out from-here thither and took there land

'Erik the Red was the name of a man from Broadfjord who went there from here and took possession of the land' (LIB 127)

At stage II of the change, er and sem appear in variation in relative function. (3)a and b are taken from a text composed during this period (Hoensa-Thóris Saga, ca. 1380; page and line numbers from Vigfusson & Powell 1905).[3]

- (3)a. á skickjonne er Gunnarr hafði yfer sér
 on cloak-the REL Gunnar had over himself

'on the cloak that Gunnar wore' (Hoens. 27;16)

- b. þat fóðr sem hrossonóm var ætlat þá
 that fodder REL horses-the was intended before
 DAT

'the hay that had been intended for the horses'(Hoens. 13;9)

The final stage in this development is represented by Modern Icelandic, in which sem is the only REL in use in the spoken language.[4]

2. Relative clauses in Old Icelandic

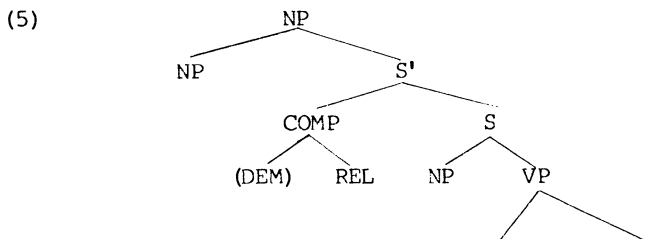
As (2) and (3) show, Icel. RCs follow the familiar Gmc. pattern of head NP followed by a REL and the body of the relative clause. Relative er, like its successor sem, was a particle indeclinable for number, gender, person, and case. Very often, however, the particle was strengthened or 'reinforced' with a preceding demonstrative pronoun, agreeing in case with the head noun in the matrix S (cf. Heusler 1932:158ff.). Thus, in (4), the pronoun þeirra appears in the genitive case in agreement with the head N manna.

- (4) ok annara spakra manna þeirra er til þess vðru teknir
 and other wise men those REL to this were chosen
 GEN GEN GEN GEN GEN
 and of other wise men who were designated for the task' (LIB 306)

These strengthened relative clauses appear to alternate freely with RCs containing only the bare REL er. The demonstrative frequently appears in cases where the relative clause has been extraposed, i.e. follows sentential material outside the noun phrase. Instead of signalling the relation of the relativized NP to the verb in the embedded sentence (as in languages like Latin and German), the demonstrative seems simply to have been a kind of focussing element, anaphorically referring back to the head noun

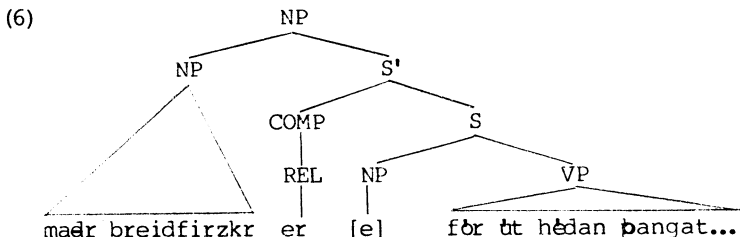
and signalling that more information about it was forthcoming. I will return to this subject in Section 3.

From a syntactic point of view, the function of a REL is to tie together a constituent and a sentence into a single syntactic entity: namely, an NP. The embedded sentence can be considered a complement of the head it modifies in the same sense as the embedded sentences following declarative verbs are complements of those verbs (Bresnan 1972; Stahlke 1976). Er (and other Gmc. RELs) may thus be termed a complementizer (COMP). The syntactic structure of OI RCs can therefore be represented as:



The node (DEM) in this structure represents the optional strengthening demonstrative mentioned above.

A defining characteristic of RCs, from the viewpoint of a universal semantic characterization, is the presence in the modifying clause of a "nominal which is coreferential with a nominal outside the clause" (Downing 1978:378). The semantic function of a REL is to relate (specifically, to identify) these two nominal elements. In Icel. and the other Gmc. languages, the nominal inside the embedded clause has no surface representation; i.e., it is realized as a gap. (6) shows the tree representation for the RC in (2), with the missing NP constituent (in this case, the subject of the embedded clause) indicated by [e].



3. Other uses of er in Old Icelandic

Before turning to a syntactic description of constructions containing the comparative particle sem in OI, it will be useful first to give a fuller description of the uses of er at Stage I. In addition to RCs, er could also be used after temporal and locative (cf. note 2) adverbs to introduce sentential complements:

- (7) ok hafði xciiii vetr pá er hann andaðisk
and had 94 winters then COMP he died

'and [who] was 94 years old when he died' (LIB 265)

- (8) En síðan er menn kómu í bðair pá
and after COMP men went into booths then
lagðisk hann niðr þorgeirr
lay-himself he down Thorgeir

'And after the men had gone back to their booths,
Thorgeir lay down' (LIB 181-182)

(9) shows a number of other noun and adverb expressions in which er also appeared:

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------|------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| (9)a. <u>hvatki</u> <u>er</u> | 'whatever' | d. <u>eptir</u> <u>er</u> | 'after' |
| b. <u>hverki</u> <u>er</u> | 'whoever' | e. <u>meðan</u> <u>er</u> | 'while' |
| c. <u>hvargi</u> <u>er</u> | 'wherever' | f. <u>í því</u> <u>er</u> | 'at the moment when' |

Each of these, like the er expressions in (7) and (8), contains an indefinite pronominal or an adverbial head, which is then linked to a following embedded clause by er. Such constructions are syntactically and semantically very close to RCs, although for lack of space I will not demonstrate this here. Suffice it to say that er is best considered a COMP in these uses as well.

Of the eight er expressions in (7)-(9), it may be noted that five are temporal in meaning. The frequent use of er in temporal clauses, particularly in the expression pá er, is most probably the source of the use of er alone to mean 'when', as in (10):

- (10) þat mun verða satt er vðr slitum í sundr
that shall become true when we break asunder
löginn at vðr munum slíta ok friðinn
law-the that we shall break also peace-the

'It will prove true that when we sunder the law we will
also sunder the peace.' (LIB 199)

Later texts show unspecified er in temporal clauses much more frequently (cf. Cleasby 1957:132). This suggests that er in OI was in the process of taking on a more specialized function as a temporal adverb, at the same time that its REL function was being taken over by sem.

So far we have considered three uses of er in early OI: first as a REL, second as a COMP in adverbial clauses, and finally, as an adverb with the meaning 'when'. Space restrictions do not permit enumeration of all uses of er; however, it may be noted that er occasionally appears in certain other complementizing functions more frequently served by the general COMP at 'that' (cf. Cleasby 1957:132; Heusler 1932:156-164). If we consider in

addition that the word for the copula 'is' (etymologically not related to the REL) also happens to be er, it becomes apparent why er is such a ubiquitous word in OI texts, sometimes appearing as many as five times in a single sentence.

Against this background we might recall the frequent use, discussed in Section 2, of a reinforcing demonstrative pronoun preceding relative er. As mentioned above, the demonstrative appears to have served as a focussing element, with the discourse function of referring back to an NP, foregrounding it and signaling that it was to be further modified. Sankoff & Brown (1976) pointed out that just such a focussing property is one of the main discourse functional characteristics of RELs. If this is so, we may ask why a language would have a possible strategy of doubly focussing an NP, as if one focussing element were insufficient. Considering the heavy functional load of er as described above, it seems reasonable to suggest that this element had, by the end of Stage I, become weakened in its functions (characteristic of RELs in general) as an identifier and focuser of NPs, and therefore needed reinforcement in these roles.

It would seem from the above description that the linguistic situation at Stage I contains at least the potential for a change in REL to occur. This brings us to the question of why it was that the comparative particle was selected as the new REL--in other words, what was it about sem which made it a likely candidate to supplant the bleached relativizer er?

4. Comparative Sem

Syntactically, comparative sem in Old Icelandic patterns very similarly to its semantic counterpart as in English. As illustrated in (1) above, it may appear in adjective and noun phrases, introducing either an NP or a clause. In addition, sem occurs in adverbial phrases corresponding to English like constructions; these will not concern us here.

An examination of NPs containing sem found in texts composed at various dates throughout the OI period shows that the basic structure of comparative NPs was quite stable during this time. This structure is essentially that found in cognate constructions in the other Gmc. languages: it consists of one of a small set of comparative determiners, together with the noun it modifies; following these are sem and either a clause (cf.(11)) or an NP.

- (11)a. en slíka svívirping...sem Kjartan hefer ypr gort
 but such humiliation as Kjartan has you done
 NOM NOM DAT

'but such a humiliation as Kjartan has subjected you to'

- b. þat var et sama sem hann hafþe honum greitt
 that was the same as he had him paid
 NOM NOM

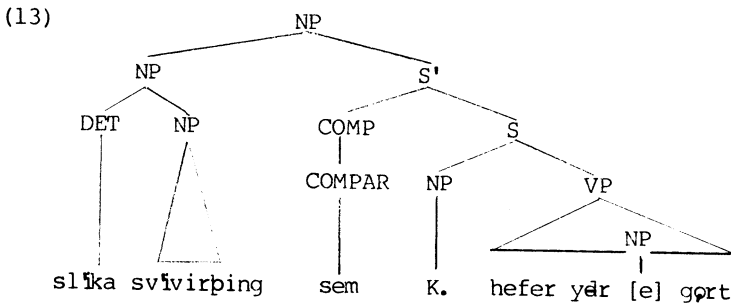
'it was the same [price] as he had paid him'
 (a & b from Heusler 1932:153)

where an adjective or quantifier appears in the head NP, the degree adverb svá 'so' appears in place of a determiner:

- (12)a. í svá bvænt efne sem komet var
 in so hopeless position as come was
 DAT
 'in such a hopeless position as things had come to'
- b. svá mörgum...köppom sem þar var saman skipat
 so many warriors as there were together assembled
 DAT DAT
 'to as many warriors as were assembled there'
 (a & b from Heusler 1932:152)

The syntactic function of sem in (11) and (12) is to link an NP with a clause which modifies it. Sem serves, in other words, to combine an NP and a sentence into a syntactic unity which may then function as a term in the matrix sentence. (Note that the NP-sem constructions occur in subject (11a), predicate complement (11b), prepositional object (12a), and indirect object (12b) position in the matrix S.)

Recalling the syntactic description of relative er given in Section 2, we can see that the comparative particle in NPs functions exactly like a REL: both introduce sentential complements of an NP head. If we compare the tree representations of relative and comparative constructions (CCs), a further syntactic parallel becomes evident: each contains a gap in its embedded sentence, corresponding to a missing term in that sentence. (13) represents the syntactic structure of the CC in (11)a (where COMPAR is the syntactic category containing sem and the other OI comparative particle, en 'than'):



Note that the trees in (6) and (13) are isomorphic in their basic structure.

In view of the close syntactic parallel between the comparative and the relative particle in Old Icelandic, we might expect there to be semantic similarities between these elements as well. And in fact, this is exactly what we find. The REL, as we saw in section 2, semantically links two nominal terms, one of which is

syntactically represented by a gap, in a relation of identity. In a CC, there must also be a semantic relation holding between the head nominal and the "gapped" element in the embedded S. As the term 'comparative' implies, however, in these constructions a comparison is set up between two entities. When a quantifier is present (eg. svà 'so', mikill 'much', margr 'many'), the comparison is one of equality of degree, amount, or number. The determiner slíkr, on the other hand, expresses a comparison of identity of kind, or more generally, similarity. (This is its meaning in its original sense, since it derives from svà líkr, 'thus like'.) In the case of sama, 'same', and jöfn 'equal, same', the comparative relations which it is possible to indicate seem to include both identity of kind and absolute identity, like Engl. same.

It is apparent from this that there is some overlap between RCs and CCs with regard to the specific semantic relations they may contain. The main semantic difference between sem and er is that er is a direct indicator of the identity relation, while sem indicates only that some type of comparative relation is present, which may or may not be resolved as an identity. The precise relation between the two semantically linked terms in a CC is specified by the comparative determiner or adverb in the head NP.

A final point of similarity between the REL and comparative sem concerns their discourse functions. Like er, sem refers the hearer back to a preceding NP and introduces further material modifying it. As such, it too has as one of its main discourse functions that of focussing the head nominal of the construction.

5. The change of sem to a relativizer

Having observed the syntactic, semantic, and functional similarities between sem and er, we are now in a position to consider the role these similarities played in the change of sem to a REL.

First, we may note that since sem already occurred in NPs as a COMP, its extension into RCs was no great change from a syntactic point of view. If we accept that linguistic changes tend to conform to existing structural models (cf. Meillet 1916:168), then the fact that the change could occur while preserving phrase structure seems likely to have been a facilitating factor in its realization.

To understand the actual motivation behind the change, we must look to the semantic and discourse functions shared by er and sem. We have seen that er, already by Stage I, shows signs of having been weakened in its roles of focussing an NP and identifying (or more generally speaking, establishing a semantic relation between) two nominal elements. Since sem also served both as a focusser and as an establisher of a semantic link, it could be pressed into service in these roles in constructions normally requiring er--i.e., in those cases where the semantic relation present was one of identity, and in which there was no overt comparison indicated. Viewed in this light, the change of sem to a REL is an instance of renouvellement, or renewal (Meillet 1916). In this type of change, a semantically more expressive item re-

places a 'bleached' one, and in turn becomes bleached itself. Comparative sem was a more explicit focussing element than er, since unlike er, it was unambiguous in this role. Sem was able to take on the final, identifying, function of a REL because its meaning of indicating a comparison of similarity (and hence identity of kind) between two entities is semantically very close to indicating an identification--as evidenced by the fact that Icelandic, like many other languages, does not in every case formally distinguish between these two meanings (cf. Jespersen 1927:170 on Eng. 'the same as' vs. 'the same that') Once sem was used in place of er to indicate identification in constructions in which there was no overt comparison (i.e. in which no comparative determiner was present), it lost its comparative meaning in these constructions and was grammaticalized to a semantically 'emptier' relative particle.

Another factor which seems to have facilitated the appearance of sem in RCs is the concomitant bleaching of the comparative determiner, slíkr, from comparative to purely demonstrative function. English such shows the effects of a similar bleaching in certain forms of discourse, as in 'Bring such materials with you as you need', where the meaning of such...as closely approximates 'those which'. The OI example in (14) illustrates the bleaching of slíkr:

- (14) slíkt lið sem hann fækk
such aid as he received

'such aid as he received [was not willingly granted]'
(i.e. 'the aid that he received...') (Cleasby 1957:568)

Since the DET slíkr selects sem as its complementizing particle, the effect of this development is to place sem in constructions with no comparative meaning. The slíkr...sem construction thus offers one possible path for sem to enter into the relative system.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have shown, on syntactic, semantic, and discourse functional grounds, that the change of the OI comparative particle sem to a REL is explainable in terms of historical linguistic theory. Several distinct motivating and facilitating factors for the change were identified, operating on various levels of linguistic structure. In view of the apparent naturalness of this change, we might expect that it is not simply one isolated occurrence, but instead a specific instance of what may happen when general principles of linguistic change operate on languages which have the prerequisite structures (eg. comparative complement constructions) and which present an appropriate set of conditions for change. In fact, there is evidence that similar developments occurred independently in at least two other non-Scandinavian languages. In Old High German (OHG), and in certain varieties of present-day British English, a comparative particle

semantically and syntactically analogous to sem also took on relativizing function, as shown in (15) and (16):

- (15) OHG: Über daz sô demo cheisere lîeb was
 over that REL to-the emperor pleasing was
 'over that which was pleasing to the emperor'
 (Lockwood 1968:250)

- (16)a. Let them marry you, as don't know you
 b. him as I have made mention on (Jespersen 1927:173)

Although these and the Icel. development occurred in closely related languages, it is unlikely that all three are reflexes of one and the same change; first, because they seem to have arisen at widely different time periods, and secondly, because the particles involved are not all cognate. These independent changes were doubtless facilitated, however, by the structural parallels between RCs and CCs described in Section 2, which are characteristic of the Gmc. languages in general. Jespersen (1927:Ch.9) noted these parallels in English; Bresnan (1972:Ch.4-5) enlarged on his observations and formalized the analysis within a generative framework. Behaghel (1928:279), too, mentions the close resemblance between solch 'such' constructions and RCs in German.

Interestingly, there is evidence that some degree of structural similarity between the two construction types exists outside the Gmc. family as well. Bresnan (1972), in arguing for the parallel syntactic treatment of RELs and comparative particles in English, cites the following observation from Greenberg (1966): He notes that in languages with clausal comparatives, the comparative and the relative markers appear to occur in the same position in the clause, i.e. either clause-initially or clause-finally. If, as seems reasonable, the semantic and discourse functional properties of comparative markers parallel those of RELs on a more general basis, we might suppose that the potential for the change of a comparative to a REL may not be confined to Germanic.

The possibility that a change of this nature may occur cross-linguistically raises a number of questions for further exploration. First we may ask, what is the extent of the similarity, on all three levels of linguistic structure, between RCs and CCs outside of the Gmc. language family? Does this similarity go deep enough to suggest that such a change should be added to a universal typology of possible changes in relative markers? Secondly, why is it that the comparative seems to be a much less common source for RELs than other sources (e.g. demonstratives or interrogatives), even among languages exhibiting the necessary prerequisites for such a change to occur? Does this give us an indication of the relative 'cognitive distance' between the conceptual structures underlying these various grammatical structures? The present study, it is hoped, will provide an impetus toward investigation of these important questions.

NOTES

*For many valuable comments and suggestions, as well as encouragement, I owe appreciation to Michael Barlow, Hava Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot, William Croft, Kirsti Koch-Christensen, Rob Robinson, Jane Simpson, Nancy Wiegand, and above all Elizabeth Closs Traugott. Thanks also to Anatoly Liberman, James Cathey, Frank Hugus, and especially Ted Andersson for lending me their textual expertise. All errors of fact or interpretation remain, of course, my own.

1. The archaic features of the Edda (including the exclusive use of er as REL, cf. Heusler 1932:153) indicate that although the Eddic verses were committed to writing relatively late (ca. 1270), they probably had a much longer history of oral transmission; some parts may date back as far as the ninth century (T. Andersson, p.c.; cf. also McTurk 1981).

2. There is some evidence in LIB that the change may have already been underway; however, indications of this are very few, and LIB remains a good representative of the state of the language at Stage I. Of the 75 RCs in LIB, only one contains sem. I considered as RCs those constructions consisting of an NP and a subordinate clause serving to characterize or determine that NP, with no comparative determiner or adverb present (e.g. slíkr 'such', svá 'so'). sem also appears twice in the clause introductory locative expression þar sem, 'there where', versus two appearances of þar er, the more usual construction in the Edda. Such locative expressions are similar to RCs in that the locative adverb can be considered a pro-form, deictic to a particular place, thus behaving syntactically like a noun head in an RC. These early occurrences of sem seem to indicate that its first appearance with relative-like function was in locative adverbial expressions; it later may have spread to other, more canonical RCs (i.e. those with full noun heads) by way of RCs in which the head N was locative (cf. 'the place where'). It may be noted that this goes against the assumption of Keenan and Comrie (1977) that use of a REL in a locative construction presupposes its use in more "basic" functions, such as in relativizing subjects or objects. A similar case is the Tok Pisin REL hia (< Engl. here), which also made its first appearance in locative constructions (cf. Sankoff & Brown 1976).

3. Hoensa-Thoris Saga contains 17 instances of relative sem vs. 36 of relative er; in addition, there are 11 occurrences of þar sem, versus 2 of þar er. Although the number of examples is small, there are certain apparent tendencies which a more fine-grained study should pursue: one is its frequent use in locative expressions (see note 2); another is its appearance as a REL in quantified NPs (e.g. those containing allir, 'all'). Other texts in Stage II show sem often occurring in 'generalizing' RCs ('whoever', 'whatever' etc.), which also have quantifier-like properties (as pointed out by W. Croft, p.c.). On the connection between quantifiers and relativization in English, see Carlson 1977. These early uses of sem, along with the slíkr sem construction (see §5),

seem to indicate points of its entry into the relative system.

4. It is difficult to determine even an approximate date for the loss of REL er in spoken Icel. The written tradition is so conservative that er appears as a REL even today in certain formal texts. A tentative suggestion, based on a superficial examination of late medieval and early modern texts, is that the change was essentially complete by the end of the 16th century (A.Lieberman, p.c.).

REFERENCES

- BEHAGHEL O. 1928. Deutsche Syntax. Bd. III, Die Satzgebilde. Heidelberg: Carl Winter.
- BRESNAN, J. 1972. Theory of complementation in English syntax. Ph.D diss., M.I.T. Publ. 1979, New York: Garland Press.
- CARLSON, G. 1977. Amount relatives. Lg. 53:520-542.
- CLEASBY, R., G. VIGFUSSON & W.A. CRAIGIE. 1957. An Icelandic-English dictionary. London: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 2nd ed.
- DOWNING, B. 1978. Some universals of relative clause structure. In Universals of human language, Vol. 4, Syntax. Ed. by J. Greenberg, et al. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- GREENBERG, J. 1966. Some universals of grammar with respect to the ordering of meaningful elements. In Universals of language. Cambridge: MIT Press. 2nd ed.
- HERMANSSON, H., ed. and transl. 1930. The book of the Icelanders (Íslendingabók), by Ari Thorgilsson. Islandica 20. Ithaca: Cornell University Library.
- HEUSLER, A. 1932. Altislandisches Elementarbuch. Heidelberg: Carl Winter. 3rd ed.
- JESPERSEN, O. 1927. A modern English grammar on historical principles. London: Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- JÖHANNESSON, A., E. SVEINSSON, O. LARUSSON, & Þ. JÖHANNESSON, eds. 1956. Íslensk handrit, Vol. I: Íslendingabók Ara Fréða, AM 113a and 113b, folio facsimiles.
- KEENAN, E. and B. COMRIE. 1977. Noun phrase accessibility and universal grammar. LI 8:63-99.
- LOCKWOOD, W.B. 1968. Historical German syntax. London: Oxford at the Clarendon Press.
- McTURK, R.W. 1981. Variation in Beowulf and the poetic Edda: A chronological experiment. In C. Chase, ed. The dating of Beowulf. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press.
- MEILLET, A. 1916. Le renouvellement des conjonctions. Linguistique historique et linguistique générale. Paris: Champion.
- NYGAARD, M. 1905. Norrøn Syntax. Kristiania: Aschehoug.
- SANKOFF, G. and P. BROWN 1976. The origins of syntax in discourse. Lg. 52:631-666.
- STAHLKE, H. 1976. Which that. Lg. 52:584-610.
- VIGFUSSON, G. & F. YORK POWELL. 1905. Origines Islandicae, Vol. II. London: Oxford at the Clarendon Press.
- WEINREICH, U., W. LABOV & M. HERZOG, 1968. Empirical foundations for a theory of language change. In Lehmann, W.P. & Y. Malkiel, eds., Directions for historical linguistics: A symposium. Austin: U. of Texas Press.