

DATIVE VS. NOMINATIVE: CHANGES IN QUIRKY SUBJECTS IN ICELANDIC

Thórhallur Eythórsson

Abstract

In this paper I propose an analysis of two changes in case assignment occurring in quirky (oblique) subjects in Icelandic. The first change substitutes dative case for accusative (Dative Sickness), while the second involves the tendency for “impersonal” constructions to become personal, whereby oblique NPs occurring with the finite verb in 3rd person become nominative agreeing with the verb (Nominative Sickness). I argue that these two changes are conditioned by different factors. Dative Sickness is motivated by semantics (thematic roles), while Nominative Sickness is motivated by syntax (structure). I suggest that both changes can be accounted for in terms of a cue-base approach to language acquisition.

1. Introduction

In this paper I propose an analysis of two changes in case assignment occurring in quirky (oblique) subjects in Icelandic (Svavarsdóttir 1982, Halldórsson 1982, Smith 1994, 1996, Jónsson 1997-98).¹ The first change under consideration here substitutes dative case for accusative with subjects of Experiencer verbs. A relatively recent phenomenon in the history of Icelandic, it is frowned upon by prescriptivists and traditionally labeled Dative Sickness (*þágufallssýki* or *méranir*).

- (1) Mig > mér vantar hníf.
me-acc me-dat needs knife-acc
'I need a knife.'

The second change involves the tendency for “impersonal” constructions to become personal, whereby either accusative or dative NPs occurring with the finite verb in 3rd person become nominative, agreeing with the verb. This type of change, which is in fact attested already in Old Icelandic, has been called Nominative Substitution or Nominative Sickness (Smith 1994, 1996); the latter label is used here for the sake of convenience.

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- (2) a. Bátinn > báturinn rak að landi.
the boat-acc the boat-nom drifted-3sg to land
'The boat drifted to the shore.'
- b. Tröllkonuna > tröllkonan dagaði uppi.
the giantess-acc the giantess-nom dawned-3g up
'The giantess was caught by the daylight.'

I argue that Dative Sickness (DS) and Nominative Sickness (NS) are conditioned by different factors: DS is motivated by semantics (thematic roles), while NS is motivated by syntax (structure). Specifically, I suggest that both changes can be accounted for in terms of a cue-based approach (Lightfoot 1999), on the assumption that case can be a cue in language acquisition.

The focus of this investigation is primarily on modern Icelandic, for which the assumption of oblique subjects is fairly uncontroversial (Andrews 1976, Thráinsson 1979, Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson 1985, Sigurðsson 1989, 1992, Jónsson 1996, and many others). The same is true of Faroese, although the phenomenon has not been studied as intensively as in Icelandic (Barnes 1986, Thráinsson et al. 2000). In both Icelandic and Faroese oblique NPs pass all indisputable subjecthood tests. On the other hand, oblique NPs in comparable constructions in languages like German do not exhibit subject properties in the same way. In modern Mainland Scandinavian and English, finally, the oblique case on NPs in such constructions, for which there is evidence at earlier stages of these languages, has been replaced by the nominative.²

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2 I present the “symptoms” of NS and DS in modern Icelandic. Section 3 summarizes the results of two previous studies of the case alternations in subjects of Experiencer verbs in Icelandic (Halldórsson 1982 and Svavarsdóttir 1982). In section 4 I attempt a “diagnosis” of NS and DS, concluding that both “diseases” involve morphosyntactic leveling of productive patterns attributable to frequency. This is followed, in section 5, by a discussion of rare instances of a change from personal to impersonal constructions (i.e. the opposite of NS). In section 6 I propose a formal analysis of the changes in question in the spirit of Lightfoot (1999). Section 7 concludes the paper.

2. Symptoms

In Icelandic DS only affects accusative Experiencer subjects, as in (1); other types of subjects, including the small number of genitive subjects (which are never Experiencers), are immune to it.³ Verbs taking accusative Experiencer subjects in standard Icelandic are given in (3) (Jónsson 1997-98:35-36). The list contains 37 verbs and may be considered near-exhaustive. Note that the glosses are in some cases only approximate as the meaning may depend on the particular construction in which the verbs occur.

² The status of oblique subject-like NPs in Old Norse is currently a matter of ongoing debate. Their subject status was proposed by Rögnvaldsson (1991, 1996), Barðdal (1997) and Haugan (1998, 1999). Similar claims have been made by Allen (1986, 1995, 1996) concerning oblique subject-like NPs in Old and early Middle English. Other scholars argue against the status of oblique NPs as subjects in Old Norse (Faarlund 1990, 1999, Kristoffersen 1991, 1994, Mørck 1992, Juntune 1992, and Falk 1995, 1997). I will not take sides in this debate here as the precise status of oblique subject-like NPs at the earlier stages is not crucial for the claims of the present paper.

³ Apparent exceptions to this generalization, where DS might seem to affect nominative subjects, are discussed in section 5.

- (3) *bresta* ‘lack’, *dreyma* ‘dream’, *furða* ‘be surprised at’, *fýsa* ‘want’, *greina á um* ‘disagree about’, *gruna* ‘suspect’, *henda* ‘happen’, *hrylla við* ‘shudder at’, *hungra* ‘hunger’, *iðra* ‘repent, regret’, *kala* ‘suffer frostbite’, *kitla* ‘tickle’, *klígja* ‘feel nauseated, sick’, *langa* ‘want’, *lengja eftir* ‘long for’, *lysta* ‘want’, *minna* ‘(seem to) remember’, *misminna* ‘remember incorrectly’, *muna um* ‘make a difference to’, *óra fyrir* ‘imagine’, *ráma í* ‘vaguely remember’, *skorta* ‘lack’, *sundla* ‘feel dizzy’, *svengja* ‘feel hungry’, *svima* ‘feel dizzy’, *svíða* ‘smart, sting’, *syfja* ‘grow sleepy’, *ugga* ‘fear’, *undra* ‘wonder, surprise’, *vanhaga um* ‘lack, need’, *vanta* ‘lack, need’, *varða um* ‘concern’, *velgja* ‘feel nauseated’, *verkja* ‘hurt, ache’, *þrjóta* ‘run short of, lack’, *þverra* ‘decrease’, *þyrsta* ‘feel thirsty’

NS, on the other hand, may affect quirky subjects which are Themes, as in (2) (Jónsson 1997-98:35). As the list in (4) shows, the number of verbs taking accusative Theme subjects is quite limited.

- (4) *bera* ‘be carried’, *brjóta* ‘break’, *daga uppi* ‘be caught by daylight’, *drifa að* ‘come flocking’, *hefja* ‘be raised’, *reka* ‘drift’, *fasta* ‘be fastened’, *fylla* ‘get swamped’, *leggja* ‘be laid’, *lengja* ‘get longer; long for’, *leysa* ‘thaw’, *lægja* ‘subside’, *saka* ‘be hurt’, *ysta* ‘curdle’

NS may also affect dative Themes, as the following examples show (cf. Jónsson 1997-98:25).⁴

- (5) a. Leiknum > leikurinn lyktaði með jafntefli.
the match-dat the match-nom ended-3.sg with draw
‘The match ended in a draw.’
b. Bátnum > báturinn hvolfdi á miðju vatninu.
the boat-dat the boat-nom capsized-3.sg on middle the lake
‘The boat capsized in the middle of the lake.’

The question arises whether NS may also affect oblique Experiencers. It is implicit in Jónsson’s (1997-98) study of verbs taking quirky subjects in Icelandic that this is not the case. Accordingly, nominative would be substituted for the oblique cases in Theme subjects, whereas dative – not nominative – would be substituted for accusative in Experiencer subjects. On closer inspection, however, matters turn out to be somewhat more complex. Thus it has long been noticed that at least certain verbs (e.g. *dreyma* ‘dream’, *skorta* ‘lack’, *vanta* ‘lack, need’, *langa* ‘want’) that standardly take oblique Experiencer subjects occur with nominative subjects among some speakers. This is confirmed by two studies which were carried out independently of each other nearly two decades ago, Halldórsson (1982) and Svavarsdóttir (1982).

⁴ According to the lists in Jónsson (1997-98:36-37), the following verbs select dative Theme subjects: *ffölga* ‘increase in number’, *fleygja fram* ‘progress rapidly’, *fækka* ‘decrease in number’, *hlaða niður* ‘pile up’, *hnigna* ‘decline’, *hvolfa* ‘capsize’, *kyngja niður* ‘fall thick’, *léttá* ‘be relieved’, *linna* ‘stop’, *ljósta niður/saman* ‘strike/collide’, *ljúka* ‘stop’, *lykta* ‘end’, *seinka* ‘be delayed’, *skjóta upp* ‘rise, emerge’, *skola* ‘be washed’, *slota* ‘stop’, *vaxa fylgi* ‘increase support’, *þoka* ‘move slowly’. Note that NS does not affect dative Goal subjects, which mostly occur with “middles” in *-st*, e.g. *áskotnast* ‘get’, and a few fixed expressions, e.g. *standa til boða* ‘be offered’ (in all, about 20 verbs; cf. Jónsson 1997-98:37).

3. Previous studies

3.1 Halldórsson (1982)

Halldórsson (1982) presents the results of a synchronic and a diachronic investigation of the use of quirky subjects with 22 verbs standardly taking accusative Experiencer subjects in Icelandic (i.e., a subset of the list in (3) above). The main focus of the synchronic part of the investigation was on the extent of DS in modern Icelandic. 151 students in a junior college in Reykjavík were presented with a questionnaire in class where they were asked to indicate whether they had heard the dative or accusative version of each sentence. The result indicated that DS had become widespread, with over 60% of the students maintaining that they had frequently heard the dative (i.e. the innovation) with the verbs *vanta* ‘lack, need’ and *langa* ‘want’.

The diachronic part of the study traced the development of the 22 verbs from Old Icelandic to modern Icelandic. The investigation revealed, on the one hand, that DS is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of Icelandic. The dative instead of an expected accusative is attested with only one verb (*skorta* ‘lack’) in a single Old Icelandic (13th century) text.⁵

- (6) En allt þat er honom scortir i vm vættin.
but all that which him-dat lacks in about the testimony
‘But everything which he lacks in testimony.’
(Grág. (Kon.): 242; (Stb.):92).

Generally, however, in Old Icelandic this verb, as all the other verbs studied by Halldórsson, occurs with the accusative. Moreover, it was established that while there are sporadic occurrences of dative for the expected accusative already in 17th century texts, most of the examples date from the mid-19th century onwards. On the other hand, the investigation showed that the substitution of nominative for oblique cases is attested already in Old Icelandic, affecting various kinds of quirky subjects (or subject-like NPs), including Experiencers (at least with *dreyma* ‘dream’, *gruna* ‘suspect’, *langa* ‘want’, *ugga* ‘fear’ and *undra* ‘wonder’). Some examples of NS from Old Icelandic texts are given in (7):

- (7) a. Ein kona... dreymdi þann dróm.
one woman-nom dreamt-3.sg that dream
‘One woman... dreamt that dream.’ (Mar.: 1029)
- b. fióttist hann ok spurt hafa, at Orkneyíngar myndi
seemed he also learned have that Orkneymen-nom would-3.pl
lítt langa til, at hann kæmi vestr þagat.
little want to that he came westward thither
‘It also seemed to him that the men of the Orkneys would not be
eager for him to come here to the west.’ (Fms. VII:28)
- c. fietta undra víkingar.
this wonder-3.pl vikings-nom
‘The vikings wondered at this.’ (Fas. II:530)

⁵ A further example is *lysta* ‘want’, attested in a manuscript from the late 13th century, which, however, is known to have been written by a Norwegian (Halldórsson 1982).

In later periods of Icelandic the number of verbs taking nominative subjects increased, and by early modern Icelandic times (16th-17th centuries) the following verbs are attested with nominative (as well as accusative): *dreyma* ‘dream’, *gruna* ‘suspect’, *hungra* ‘feel hungry’, *kala* ‘suffer frostbite’, *langa* ‘want’, *skorta* ‘lack’, *undra* ‘wonder’, *vanta* ‘lack, need’, *verkja* ‘hurt’, *þyrsta* ‘feel thirsty’. In modern Icelandic texts (19th-20th centuries) nominative is attested with most of these verbs as well. The examples in (8) are among those documented in the Dictionary of the University of Iceland Institute of Lexicography (*Orðabók Háskólans* (OH)). The examples are, respectively, from a novel first published in 1872 (8a), a 1953 political pamphlet (8b), and a newspaper article from 1973 (8c).

- (8) a. Ég hefði langað að tala við þig.
I-nom would have-3.sg wanted to talk to you
‘I would have wanted to talk to you.’ (JMýrdMann.:110 (OH)).
- b. hefir flokkurinn alltaf skort meirihlutastöðu á Alþingi.
has the party-nom always lacked majority in parliament
‘The party has always lacked the majority in Parliament.’
(Sjálfstæðisstefnan 1953:16 (OH)).
- c. þeir dreyma samt.
they-nom dream-3.pl still
‘They still dream.’ (Lesb. Mbl. 5/9 '71, 7:5 (OH)).

In summary, several of the 22 Experiencer verbs studied by Halldórsson (1982) occur with nominative subjects in Old Icelandic and onwards; thus there seems to have been some tendency to substitute nominative for the original accusative with these verbs. It may be noted that the same also appears to be true of some other Experiencer verbs originally selecting the dative (not studied by Halldórsson).⁶ The examples below are from Old Icelandic (9a) and modern Icelandic (9b), respectively. The verb *leiðask* (mod. Icel. *leiðast*) ‘loath, get tired of’ usually selects a dative Experiencer, but there are a number of examples in Old Icelandic texts where it occurs with nominative, as in (9a) (cf. Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957). In modern Icelandic the verb *lynda við* ‘get along with’ (9b) standardly occurs with dative, but it may also occur with nominative without any noticeable semantic difference (Friðjónsson 1989).

- (9) a. Bóndi leiðisk konu sína.
farmer-nom gets tired of wife-acc self’s-acc
‘The farmer gets tired of his wife.’ (Post 656A.ii.15)
- b. Piltinum > pilturinn lyndir ekki við stúlkuna.
the lad-dat the lad-nom gets along not with the girl
‘The lad does not get along with the girl.’

The tendency to substitute nominative for oblique case on subjects may have diminished somewhat as DS became stronger. On the other hand, a few examples of the substitution of dative for the expected accusative can be found in written sources from older Icelandic, but most of the examples are from the mid-19th and 20th centuries.

⁶ The verbs occurring with dative Experiencer subject in standard Icelandic total around 230, including fixed expressions with *vera* ‘be’ and *verða* ‘become’ (cf. Jónsson 1997-98:37-39).

3.2 Svavarsdóttir (1982)

The study by Svavarsdóttir (1982) reports on the results of a special test which was designed to investigate the extent of DS and other “irregularities” in the case marking of subjects in modern Icelandic. The test was administered to about 200 11-year-old children in eleven schools in different parts of the country. Some of the basic results are summarized in Table 1. Here the verbs are divided into two groups, according to whether they standardly take accusative or dative Experiencer subjects. The columns show the percentages for each case form in the whole country and in three of the eleven places where the test was taken (Reykjavík, Keflavík and Seyðisfjörður), with the number of participants given in brackets.

Table 1

Case of subjects with Experiencer verbs standardly taking accusative or dative (based on Svavarsdóttir 1982)

	Total (200) 100%			Reykjavík (69) 34.2%			Keflavík (20) 9.9%			Seyðisfjörður (19) 9.4%		
	N	A	D	N	A	D	N	A	D	N	A	D
Accusative												
1. <i>dreyma</i> ‘dream’	6.4	71.3	21.3	3.0	87.0	10.1	10.0	50.0	40.0	21.1	47.4	26.3
2. <i>gruna</i> ‘suspect’	10.9	65.4	22.8	3.0	74.0	23.2	20.0	65.0	10.0	26.3	47.4	26.3
3. <i>langa</i> ‘want’	1.0	66.8	31.7		71.0	29.0		65.0	35.0	5.3	68.4	26.3
4. <i>minna</i> ‘remember’	19.8	57.9	21.8	10.1	72.5	17.4	40.0	30.0	30.0	31.6	47.4	21.1
5. <i>svíða</i> ‘smart’	1.5	50.5	47.5		58.0	42.0		35.0	60.0		42.1	58.9
6. <i>vanta</i> ‘lack, need’	1.5	63.4	34.7		74.0	26.1		60.0	40.0		63.2	36.8
Dative												
1. <i>detta</i> (í hug) ‘occur to’	5.0	11.4	83.2	3.0	17.4	79.7	10.0	5.0	85.0		10.5	89.5
2. <i>leiðast</i> ‘be bored’	1.5	12.9	85.2		11.6	88.4	10.0	25.0	65.0		5.3	94.7
3. <i>léttu</i> ‘be relieved; lift’	7.4	16.8	75.3		14.5	85.5	25.0	20.0	55.0	21.1	21.1	57.9
4. <i>liggja á</i> ‘be in a hurry’	5.9	5.5	88.6		5.8	94.2	5.0	15.0	80.0	10.5	5.3	84.2
5. <i>þykja</i> ‘feel’	1.5	7.4	91.1		11.6	88.4			100	5.3		94.7

The results of this investigation indicate, first, that the case alternations differ from one verb to another, and, secondly, that there is more variation in the case of the subject selected by these verbs than is commonly assumed. Like Halldórsson (1982), Svavarsdóttir (1982) also established that DS is pervasive in modern Icelandic. Thus the total percentage of verbs taking dative instead of the expected accusative in Table 1 varies between 21.3% (*dreyma* ‘dream’) and 47.5% (*svíða* ‘smart, sting’).⁷ It also appears that the instances of nominative for expected oblique cases (NS) are too numerous to be dismissed as due to error. To be sure, the total percentage is not very high; the highest is 19.5% with *minna* ‘(seem to) remember’. The percentage is also relatively low in the capital, Reykjavík. It is interesting to note, however, that NS is rather high outside the capital. Thus it is 40% with *minna* in Keflavík, and the overall percentage of NS is also high in Seyðisfjörður where the occurrence of *minna* ‘(seem to) remember’, *gruna* ‘suspect’, *dreyma* ‘dream’ and *léttu* ‘be relieved; lift’ with nominative is above 20%. This result is also confirmed by Halldórsson’s (1982) investigation, and so it is undeniable that NS with Experiencers exists among some

⁷ It is likely that DS has increased during the two decades since the studies by Halldórsson (1982) and Svavarsdóttir (1982), so that dative is now the norm with quirky Experiencers for the majority of the speakers of Icelandic. New studies, however, are needed in order to establish this.

speakers of modern Icelandic. More unexpected, perhaps, is the fact that a considerable proportion of the participants (a total of 5.5%–16.8%) substitute accusative for dative with the verbs of the second group in Table 1. It is possible that this is due to some kind of hypercorrection, although that is by no means clear. Whatever the explanation, the phenomenon (“Accusative Sickness”) was also noted by Halldórsson (1982) and appears to be for real.

3.3 Conclusion

As Halldórsson (1982) shows, NS has affected quirky subjects regardless of their semantics throughout the history of Icelandic, without ever completely taking over. Since the mid-19th century, however, DS has affected accusative Experiencer subjects, and dative is now more robust in the class of oblique Experiencers than the nominative resulting from NS. It would appear that a speaker of Icelandic can “suffer” from either “sickness”, or from both (except, presumably, with Experiencer subjects). Crucially, however, the speaker does not seem to have a choice over the particular case form of the subject. This is suggested by the observation that speakers who are not affected by DS only use accusative with the Experiencer verbs listed in (3), whereas those who have DS use dative, rather than accusative, with these verbs (cf. Svavarsdóttir 1982, Halldórsson 1982, Jónsson 1997-98). Therefore, the alternations are unlikely to involve “optionality” in the use of the cases, as claimed by Smith (1994, 1996). It should also be emphasized that there is no semantic difference between the use of the different cases with most of the verbs in question.⁸ Rather, it would seem that the changes result in grammars which are different from standard Icelandic (in effect, “diglossia”).⁹

4. Diagnosis

As the changes involved in NS and DS are diametrically opposed, they would seem to be conditioned by different factors. In this section I claim that the changes relate to the distinction between structural and inherent case. Both changes have in common, however, that they instantiate overgeneralization of productive patterns, with morphosyntactic leveling of an “irregular paradigm” in favor of a more general pattern.

4.1 Nominative Sickness

In modern Icelandic the number of verbs taking oblique subjects is fewer than 350 (Jónsson 1997-98). Thus nominative is the most common case on subjects, including subjects of Experiencer verbs such as *sjá* ‘see’, *heyra* ‘hear’, *elska* ‘love’, *hata* ‘hate’, etc. According to Barðdal (2000), the statistics for subjects in different case forms in modern Icelandic language use is as follows: 93.4% of subjects are

⁸ Thus, for example, a the verb *langa* ‘want’ has the same meaning irrespective of whether the subject is accusative (as in the standard language) or dative (as in the language of those affected by DS). With a few verbs, however, there is a slight semantic difference between impersonal and personal constructions, e.g. *gruna* impers. ‘suspect, guess’ (Old and mod. Icel.) and pers. ‘suspect, distrust’ (OIcel.), ‘suspect (somebody of something)’ (mod. Icel., with the particle *um*). It is plausible to assume that such difference would be a consequence of the change from impersonal to personal constructions, rather than the motivation for it.

⁹ There are certain sociolinguistic aspects to the occurrence of DS among speakers of Icelandic. The study by Svavarsdóttir (1982) established that there was a correlation between the “sickness” and both the academic performance of the participants and the social status (education) of their parents (see also Svavarsdóttir, Pálsson & Thórlindsson 1984). Moreover, a speaker affected by DS may use the standard accusative with the relevant Experiencer verbs in writing. Thus, it is possible that some speakers may operate with more than one grammar, in an “internalized diglossia” (cf. Lightfoot 1999).

nominative, 1.6% are accusative, 4.8% are dative and only 0.2% are genitive. In generative syntax, it is assumed that subjects in Icelandic move to (or are in a position coindexed with an expletive in) SpecIP. This holds of both nominative and quirky subjects. Given this, NS can be taken to involve a change from inherent case on subjects to structural case (nominative). Therefore, this change is arguably structurally motivated.

It is a common assumption, dating back at least to Jespersen (1909–49) and van der Gaaf (1904) and repackaged in modern syntactic theory by Lightfoot (1979), that the shift from impersonal to personal constructions in the history of English is due to the loss of morphological case (for an overview, see Denison 1993). Within the Principles-and-Parameters framework this position has been argued for in particular by Lightfoot (1991, 1999). The following examples, all from the works of Ælfric (c. 955–1012), illustrate the case alternations with the verb *ofhreowan* ‘pity’ in Old English (cf. Anderson 1986, Lightfoot 1999). In (10a-b) this verb occurs with a dative Experiencer and a genitive and a nominative Theme object, respectively. In (10c), however, it occurs with a nominative, rather than dative, Experiencer.

- (10) a. Him ofhreow þæs mannes.
him-dat pitied-3.sg the man-gen
‘He pitied the man.’ (ÆCHom. I, 8. 192.16)
- b. fia ofhreow ðam munece þæs hreoflian mægenleost
then pitied-3.sg the monk-dat the leper-gen feebleness-nom
‘Then the monk pitied the leper’s feebleness.’
(ÆCHom. I, 23.336.10)
- c. Se mæssepreost þæs mannes ofhreow.
the priest-nom that man-gen pitied-3.sg
‘The priest pitied that man.’ (ÆLS (Oswald) 26.262)

According to Lightfoot (1999), a “straightforward explanation” of the variation exemplified in (10) lies in the loss of morphological case.

If the oblique cases realized abstract inherent Cases assigned by verbs and other heads, their loss meant that the inherent Cases could no longer be realized... The evidence suggests that as their overt, morphological realization was lost, so inherent Cases were lost at the abstract level. NP/DPs which used to have inherent Case came to have structural Case, and this entailed syntactic changes.

(Lightfoot 1999:132-133)

Similar claims have been made concerning earlier stages of Mainland Scandinavian, e.g. by Faarlund (1999). Thus in the history of Swedish (Sundman 1985, Falk 1995, 1997) oblique case on Experiencer NPs was replaced by the nominative, as in (11). In example (11a), from Old Swedish, the verb *angra* ‘worry, regret’ occurs with an oblique Experiencer, while in (11b), from modern Swedish, this verb (mod. Swed. *ångra*) occurs with a nominative subject.

- (11) a. mik angrar thz.
me-obl worries/regrets it-nom
‘I worry/regret this’ (Svm:141)
- b. Jag ångrar det.

I-nom regret it
 ‘I regret it.’

However, the Jespersen–van der Gaaf account and later versions thereof run into problems regarding the chronology of the changes in question. This has often been pointed out, for example by Seefranz-Montag (1983, 1984), Allen (1986, 1995) and Falk (1997), all with references to earlier scholarship. The alternations in case assignment, attested in both Old English and Old Swedish, are found much earlier than any recorded loss of case endings. This is admitted by Lightfoot (1999:135), who concedes that “it is not always possible to distinguish the two systems [i.e. with and without morphological case] as cleanly as one would like”. Moreover, this kind of explanation does not work for Icelandic, which has preserved its morphological case endings virtually intact for centuries. The same is also true, for example, of Faroese and German (cf. Smith 1994, 1996). In contemporary (spoken) Faroese quirky case on subject NPs with Experiencer verbs is in the process of being replaced by nominative, although morphological case endings on nouns are still retained to a large degree vis-à-vis Old Norse or modern Icelandic (Barnes 1986, Thráinsson et al. 2000).¹⁰ The examples below show the case alternations with *droyma* ‘dream’ and *dáma* ‘like’, both taking accusative Theme objects in Faroese. The former shows alternation of accusative and nominative subjects, while the latter shows alternation of dative and nominative.¹¹

- (12) a. Meg droymdi ein so sáran dreym.
 me-acc dreamt-3.sg one such painful dream-acc
 ‘I had such a bad dream.’
 b. Eg droymdi ein ringan dreym.
 I-nom dreamt-1.sg a bad dream-acc

¹⁰ In Faroese nominative and accusative forms are distinguished at least in the singular of most masculine nouns and of one feminine stem class, while elsewhere they have become identical. The genitive has been largely superseded by circumlocutions. Interestingly, however, in spoken Faroese some neuter noun classes have adopted special endings distinguishing number (either singular or plural), thus increasing the existing case morphology. See Barnes with Weyhe (1994) and Thráinsson et al. (2000).

¹¹ As the examples in (12) and (13) show, both pronouns and nouns show have distinct case endings in Faroese. Moreover, the verb *dáma* ‘like’ in (14) takes an accusative Theme object, even with an oblique (dative) subject. This is different from Icelandic, where the corresponding verb *líka* ‘like’ takes a nominative Theme object.

- (i) Mér líka/líkar þessir hestar.
 me-dat like-3.pl/likes these horses-nom
 ‘I like these horses.’

Interestingly, a similar difference is found between Old and Middle English. As discussed by Allen (1996), the verb *lician* ‘like’, occurring with a dative Experiencer, takes a nominative Theme in Old English (iia), but the corresponding verb takes an accusative Theme in Middle English (iib). As to the theoretical significance of these facts, see fn. 14.

- (ii) a. ac gode ne licode na heora geleafleast.
 but God-dat not liked not their faithlessness-nom
 ‘But God did not like their lack of faith...’ (ÆHom. 21 68)
 b. so wel us liketh yow.
 so well us likes you-acc
 ‘We like you so much.’ (Ch. E. Cl. 106)

Dative vs. nominative

‘I had a bad dream.’

- (13) a. Konuna droymdi ein so sáran dreym.
the woman-acc dreamt-3.sg one such painful dream-acc
'The woman had such a bad dream.'
- b. Konan droymdi ein ringan dreym.
the woman-nom dreamt-3.sg a bad dream-acc
'The woman had a bad dream.'
- (14) a. Mær dámar væl hasa bókina.
me-dat likes well that book-acc
'I like this book a lot.'
- b. Eg dámi væl hasa bókina.
I-nom like-1sg well that book-acc
'I like this book a lot.'

In German much variation in case assignment is documented throughout its history, also without any significant loss of morphological case (Seeffranz-Montag 1983, 1984, Smith 1994, 1996). For example, in Middle High German the verb *an(d)en* 'apprehend' could occur with either accusative (15a) or dative (15b). In the contemporary standard language, however, the corresponding verb (*ahnen*) mostly occurs with a nominative subject. This is in fact attested already in Goethe (1749–1832), as in (15c) (cf. Seeffranz-Montag 1983, 1984, Smith 1994, 1996).

- (15) a. mich andet
me-acc apprehends
'I apprehend...' (Tristan 236.1)
- b. mir anet
me-dat apprehends
'I apprehend...' (Herbort 9592)
- c. Ich ahnt es!
I-nom apprehended-1.sg it-acc
'I apprehended (felt) it' (9,138,4 Geschw.)

In fact, modern German still exhibits alternation of accusative and dative with some Experiencer verbs, many of which also take nominative subjects. The examples in (16), modified on the basis of Smith (1994, 1996), involve the verb *schauern* 'shudder' occurring with an Experiencer NP in three different cases (accusative, dative and nominative).¹²

- (16) a. Den Mann schaudert vor Bären.
the man-acc shudders at bears
'The man shudders at bears.'
- b. Dem Mann schaudert vor Bären.
the man-dat shudders at bears

¹² There does not seem to be a semantic difference in the use of *schauern* 'shudder' with different case forms, as in (18), so in this instance the meaning is independent of the case of the Experiencer NP. With other verbs, however, there is some difference in the meaning of impersonal and personal constructions (Seeffranz-Montag 1983, 1984). On the basis of evidence discussed above, such a difference is best taken as a consequence of the change from impersonal to personal constructions, rather than as the motivation for it.

- c. ‘The man shudders at bears.’
Der Mann schaudert vor Bären.
the man-nom shudders at bears
‘The man shudders at bears.’

The facts presented in this section suggest that an explanation of the shift from impersonal to personal constructions (NS), which has been observed in the history of a variety of languages, as being due to the loss of morphological case is unlikely to be correct. So a different account is called for, to be outlined in sections 4.3 and 6 below.

4.2 Dative Sickness

DS differs from NS in that it involves a change in case assignment according to thematic role. It may therefore be assumed that it is semantically conditioned. Within the limited class of verbs taking quirky subjects, Experiencer verbs with dative subjects far outnumber those with accusative subjects in standard Icelandic. There are about 230 verbs with the dative as against less than 40 with the accusative (cf. Jónsson 1997-98:35-39). Besides, many of these verbs, especially in the latter group, are quite rare in the spoken language, and are often restricted to fixed expressions.

It has been proposed that inherent case on NPs (both subjects and objects) in Icelandic should be divided into thematic case and idiosyncratic case (Yip, Maling & Jackendoff 1987). The former is determined by a general rule on the case marking of a particular thematic role, whereas the latter is completely unpredictable. On this hypothesis, as argued by Jónsson (1997-98), dative Experiencers can be considered thematic while the synchronically “exceptional” accusative Experiencer subjects are idiosyncratic.¹³ This distinction is supported, on the one hand, by DS itself, by which accusative Experiencer subjects become dative, and, on the other hand, by facts relating to the syntax of “middle” verbs with the suffix *-st*. This suffix commonly occurs on verbs whose subject is an Experiencer or a Goal, but never on verbs with oblique Theme subjects. Therefore, Jónsson (1997-98) concludes that the “middle” suffix *-st* is incompatible with idiosyncratic case on subjects. Accordingly, DS instantiates a change in favor of thematic case on Experiencers. The reverse development from structural/thematic case to idiosyncratic case is much rarer (an example would be the change from personal to impersonal constructions, to be discussed in section 5 below).

Similar substitution of dative for accusative is documented in other languages with oblique subjects (or subject-like NPs), for example in German, as in (15a-b) and (16a-b), as well as in Old English and Old Swedish (e.g. Seefranz-Montag 1983, 1984, Smith 1994, 1996, Falk 1995, 1997). For curiosity, it may be mentioned that in Old Gutnish (which was spoken on the island of Gotland, and was one of three East Norse languages along with Old Swedish and Old Danish), a dative Experiencer (and a nominative Theme) is attested in a text from c. 1350 with the verb *droyma* ‘dream’ (17), rather than the expected accusative Experiencer (and an accusative Theme), as in Old West Norse (Oldcel. *dreyrna* ‘dream’).

- (17) þá droymdi henni draumbr.
then dreamt-3.sg her-dat dream-nom
‘Then she had a dream.’ (Guta saga).

¹³ At some point in the early (or pre-) history of Icelandic, it would seem that accusative Experiencers must have been thematic, for otherwise it is hard to see why they should exist (Luigi Burzio, p.c.). This matter awaits further scrutiny.

4.3 Leveling

In the light of the previous discussion, it is a reasonable assumption that both NS and DS involve overgeneralization of productive patterns, with leveling of an “irregular paradigm” (inherent/idiosyncratic case) in favor of a more general pattern (structural/thematic case). NS is regularization relating to the fact that in Icelandic nominative is productive as a morphological case on subjects, and by far the most frequent case.¹⁴ DS, on the other hand, is regularization in favor of one particular oblique case. In the languages mentioned above this is generally the dative. The motivation for DS would also seem to be attributable to frequency, as the class of verbs standardly taking dative is significantly larger than the class taking accusative. Interestingly, however, a different situation is found in Bengali, a language which has been argued to have quirky subjects (e.g. Klaiman 1980). Here the genitive has a tendency to replace other oblique cases, becoming the most common oblique case on NPs, including subjects.¹⁵ This suggests that in principle any oblique case – not necessarily dative – can become predominant as a result of such leveling.¹⁶

Finally, it should be mentioned that Smith (1994, 1996) has also proposed a diachronic account of the changes in case assignment (NS, DS) in terms of analogy. While I agree with his basic position, there are some important differences with respect to the overall framework. Thus, Smith’s account is cast in a unified, monostratal theory of case, and does not make use of the notions of structural and inherent case, which I believe to be crucial in explaining the two changes, in combination with the frequency factor. Moreover, his account hinges on the assumption of “optionality” in the case alternations, which is based on an incorrect assessment of modern Icelandic. As stated above, speakers of Icelandic do not normally seem to have a choice over the particular case form on the subject. So NS and DS result in grammars which are different from standard Icelandic. This situation is an instance of “diglossia”, which may even be “internalized”, involving coexisting grammars in the same individual (cf. Lightfoot 1999:92).

5. DS affecting nominative subjects?

In modern Icelandic there are a few instances in which it might seem that DS affects nominative Experiencer subjects (Jónsson 1997-98:29). Thus some speakers substitute oblique case for nominative with at least two verbs, *hlakka til* ‘look forward to’ and *kvíða fyrir* ‘be anxious about’. There does not seem to be any semantic difference in the use of the different cases with these verbs.

¹⁴ Note also the substitution of accusative for nominative on objects with Experiencer verbs in Middle English and Faroese mentioned in fn. 11. In my view, this substitution is due to an analogical change, involving morphosyntactic leveling in favor of the structural case productive on objects, i.e. the accusative.

¹⁵ I am indebted to Gillian Ramchand (p.c.) for information on this type of change (“Genitive Sickness”) in quirky subjects in Bengali.

¹⁶ Morphosyntactic leveling according to the semantics of predicates, comparable to DS, has been observed in languages with perfective auxiliary selection. In Romance and Germanic languages perfective auxiliary ‘have’ is original with both transitives and unergatives, while perfective auxiliary ‘be’ is original with the rather limited class of unaccusatives (cf. Vincent 1982, Eythórsson & Bentley 2000 and further references there). In the history of these languages auxiliary ‘have’ has spread gradually into the domain of ‘be’, in accordance with a typicality scale ranging from core to periphery (the Unaccusative Hierarchy; cf. Sorace 1999, Eythórsson & Bentley 2000). As in the case of DS with quirky subjects, the motivation for this change would seem to be frequency, as the class of verbs selecting ‘have’ is much larger than the class originally selecting ‘be’.

- (18) a. Hún > hana/henni hlakkar til jóla.
she-nom she-acc/she-dat looks forward to Christmas
'She is looking forward to Christmas.'
- b. Stúlkan > stúlkuna/stúlkunni kvíðir (kvíður) fyrir prófinu.
the girl-nom the girl-acc/the girl-dat is anxious about the exam
'The girl is anxious about the exam.'

Crucially, however, either accusative or dative may occur instead of nominative with these verbs.¹⁷ In this light, it is safe to assume that what is involved here is a rare instance of a change from personal to impersonal construction, due to some kind of overgeneralization of quirky Experiencers. Arguably, the oblique subject is introduced by analogy to other quirky Experiencer constructions. Speakers for whom an oblique subject in such constructions is grammatical may or may not have DS. Among speakers who do not have DS, the accusative may occur in these particular constructions, while the dative may occur in the speech of others, in particular those affected by DS (cf. Svavarsdóttir 1982). So these cases are no exceptions to the general rule that DS only affects accusative quirky subjects. It may be noted that comparable instances of the rare change from personal to impersonal constructions are also attested in the history of other languages such as Swedish (Falk 1995, 1997), German and English (Smith 1994, 1996).¹⁸

6. A cue-based account

In this section I would like to advance a formal account of the changes in quirky subjects in Icelandic. I propose that both NS and DS can be captured in terms of a cue-based approach to language acquisition (Dresher 1999, Lightfoot 1999). On this view, children scan their environment for designated structures or “cues”. By hypothesis, a cue is some kind of structure, an element of grammar, which is derived from the input. Cues which are realized only in certain grammars constitute the parameters specified by UG.

The cues are to be found in the mental representations which result from hearing, understanding and “parsing” utterances. As a child understands an utterance, even partially, he or she has some kind of mental representation of the utterance. These are partial parses, which may differ from the full parses that an adult has. The learner scans those representations, derived from the input, and seeks the designated cues.

(Lightfoot 1999:149)

Adopting this approach, I would like to claim that case assigned to NPs in a particular structural position (e.g. SpecIP) can be considered a cue in the acquisition of a language in which morphological case interacts with core syntactic operations. Thus,

¹⁷ A few more examples of the substitution of oblique case for nominative with Experiencer verbs have been reported, e.g. *kenna í brjósti um* ‘feel sorry for’ (with acc. and dat.) (Friðjónsson 1989:13) and *finna til* ‘feel pain’ (with dat.) (Barðdal 1999).

¹⁸ The impersonal pattern of Old English was extended during Middle English to otherwise personal verbs (e.g. *me nedeth* ‘I need’), and it even increased further by loans from Old French (e.g. *me remembreth* ‘I remember’) and Old Norse (e.g. *me wanteth* ‘I lack’), cf. Seeffranz-Montag (1983, 1984) and references there. Personal verbs that became impersonal in German include *mangeln* ‘lack’ and *brauchen* ‘use; need’ (Dal 1966:169-170).

the different morphological case forms signal the set of abstract structures to which case is assigned. These structures are elements of the internal grammar (“I-language”), manifested in the mental representations resulting from parsing utterances.

So NS relates to the fact that in Icelandic nominative is productive as a morphological case on subjects. When a child looks for cues, he or she hypothesizes on the basis of evidence provided by the general pattern in the language that the argument in SpecIP is assigned structural case and should be nominative. This may result in a grammar with nominative subject NPs only. Research into the acquisition of quirky subjects by Icelandic children supports this hypothesis. According to a study by Gunnarsdóttir (1996), quirky subjects are acquired when children are about two and a half years old, whereas before that children only use nominative with verbs selecting oblique subject NPs in standard Icelandic.¹⁹ This is expected if the difference between nominative subjects and quirky subjects relates to that of structural case and inherent case respectively. A parallel to this distinction might be seen in the formation of the synthetic past tense with weak and strong verbs in English, Icelandic and other related languages. By assumption, the past tense is formed by adding a suffix (Engl. *-(e)d*, Icel. *-ð-*) to the verb stem unless otherwise specified in the lexicon. This means that the weak (regular) past is formed by a rule, whereas strong (irregular) forms are memorized (Pinker 1999). It could be argued that case alternations on subjects in Icelandic are parallel to the formation of the past with weak and strong verbs. Accordingly, structural (nominative) case would be assigned by a rule specified by UG, while the restricted class of oblique subjects would be lexically specified and would have to be memorized. Just as children overgeneralize the weak past tense, extending its formation to the strong past, they would also overgeneralize the nominative at the expense of the oblique case forms on subjects.

Finally, since NS appears to be such a natural change, it might be asked why it never completely took over in Icelandic, ousting quirky subjects altogether. In a way, however, this question, interesting though it may be, is unanswerable as we cannot state with certainty why a particular language has not undergone more changes than it actually has. Several factors may have contributed to a situation favoring the conservatism of Icelandic: the homogeneity of the language, which has never been dialectally fragmented, in a rather isolated country; widespread literacy among all classes from the earliest times; and a strong tradition of “language cleansing policy” (*málhreinsunarstefna*) dating back at least to the 18th century, which seeks to keep Icelandic “pure” by preserving archaic features and eradicating foreign influence.

As we have seen, moreover, NS is not the whole story in Icelandic. Given the “healthy” condition of the Icelandic case system, an alternative type of change is

¹⁹ See also the study of the acquisition of quirky subjects in Icelandic by Gissurardóttir (1995). It is interesting to note that some Icelandic children have been observed to use accusative subjects consistently following the finite verb, as in (ia), and nominative (and dative) subjects preceding it, sometimes with a following accusative, as in (ib) (Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson, p.c.).

- (i) a. Langar mig í mat.
 want-3.sg. me-acc in food
 ‘I want food.’ (“Golli”, 2;6)
- b. Ég langar mig í mat.
 I-nom want-3.sg me-acc in food
 ‘I want food.’ (“Systa”, 2;6)

From this it might be concluded that the child’s grammar does not accept the accusative NP in the canonical subject position (SpecIP), to the left of the finite verb, which is reserved for nominative (and dative) NPs.

possible. This is DS, favoring thematic case over idiosyncratic case on quirky Experiencer subjects. In this instance, the morphological dative case on all but a small number of quirky Experiencers provides a cue for the child, who then overgeneralizes the dative, leading to the loss of accusative subjects with Experiencer verbs. The outcome of this change is a grammar with thematic (dative) case on subject NPs. Despite the efforts of language purists, who have fought hard against this “disease” for more than a century, it seems that their battle is doomed, with DS now being so widespread that it can be considered the norm for many, perhaps the majority, of the speakers of Icelandic.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that in Icelandic NS and DS result from different conditions relating to the distinction between structural and inherent case, respectively, in combination with a frequency factor determining the directionality of the two patterns of morphosyntactic leveling. I showed that NS may affect quirky subjects regardless of their semantics and is therefore structurally motivated, involving a change from inherent case on subjects to structural case. This is the nominative, which is by far the most common case on subjects in Icelandic. This account is preferable to an explanation of NS as being due to the loss of morphological case, which cannot be correct for Icelandic, as it has preserved its case endings virtually intact for centuries. DS, on the other hand, only affects accusative Experiencers and is semantically conditioned, involving a change in the assignment of inherent case according to thematic role in favor of one particular oblique case. In Icelandic this is the dative, which can be regarded as a thematic case on oblique Experiencer subjects. Both changes result in grammars which are different from standard Icelandic. They can be accounted for in terms of a cue-based approach (Lightfoot 1999), on the assumption that case can be a cue in language acquisition. This analysis may carry over to similar changes in case assignment in other languages with quirky subjects (or oblique subject-like NPs), including Faroese, as well as earlier stages of Mainland Scandinavian, German, English and Bengali.

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Thórhallur Eythórsson
Department of Linguistics
University of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL
England

tolli@man.ac.uk