

Adjectival predicates with oblique arguments in Icelandic

Thórhallur Eythórsson, University of Iceland
(tolli@hi.is)

In Old and Modern Icelandic certain adjectival predicates (APreds) with the copula ‘be’ occur with an argument NP in an oblique case, or with a PP complement (Nygaard 1905, Pétursdóttir 2014). Similar structures are found in German and Faroese, for example. Most of the oblique NPs in Icelandic are objects but a subset of the NPs can also be subjects, in the sense that they pass standard subject tests (e.g. control and subject–verb inversion). The NPs are almost exclusively datives, with only a few accusatives. In this paper I sketch the synchronic status of the APreds in Icelandic and briefly discuss their diachronic development in a comparative Germanic perspective.

The APreds can be classified according to the semantics of the adjectives which can express emotion/attitude (1a), relationship (1b), or state (1c) (Nygaard 1905, Pétursdóttir 2014).

- (1) a. *góður* ‘good’, *grimmur* ‘cruel’, *mótfallinn* ‘be against’
b. *náinn* ‘close’, *tengdur* ‘related (by marriage)’, *(ó)skyldur* ‘(un)related’
c. *klæddur* ‘dressed’, *litadur* ‘colored’, *skreyttur* ‘decorated’

All the NP arguments of the emotion/attitude predicates are experiencers. The arguments of the other predicates are themes.

Crucially, the dative experiencers functioning as subjects occur in NOM–DAT/DAT–NOM case frames. In other words, these structures involve “alternating predicates”, whereby the first argument in the default word order is the subject and the second one is the object, irrespective of their case. This type of predicate (first noted by Bernódusson 1982 and discussed by many others) is different from “regular” oblique subject predicates where the oblique argument is always the subject. The examples in (2) show that the same APred (*vera kær* ‘be dear’) can take either a nominative subject (2a) or an oblique subject (2b). The position of the pronouns following the finite verb in the direct questions in (2) shows that they are subjects while the pronouns following the past participle are objects. The meaning of both sentences is virtually identical.

- (2) a. *Hefur hann alltaf verið þér kær?*
has he.NOM always been you.DAT.SG dear.NOM
b. *Hefur þér alltaf verið hann kær?*
has you.DAT.SG always been he.NOM dear.NOM
‘Has he always been dear to you?’

Further adjectives taking a dative NP that can be either object or subject include *ástfölginn* ‘dear’, *dýrmætur* ‘precious’, *hagstæður* ‘favorable’, and *torveldur* ‘difficult’. Crucially, the APreds comprise no non-alternating predicates, and no other case frames are attested (e.g. no accusative or genitive subjects).

It should be noted that there is an increasing trend in Icelandic for the oblique NP in an APred structure to be replaced by a PP complement, as in (3). Significantly, all such predicates occur with a nominative subject; there is no *DAT–PP.

- (3) *Verkefnið var erfitt* [_{PP} fyrir alla].
task.DEF.NOM was difficult for all
‘The task was difficult for all.’

In diachronic terms, the occurrence of a dative NP as a subject in an alternating APred is arguably an innovation in Icelandic. Corroborating evidence for this assumption includes the following: First, as mentioned, the majority of the APreds occur with objects, but only a subset of the arguments can also function as subjects. Second, the absence of a pattern *DAT–PP further supports the claim that the nominative is primary, and the dative subject is due to a change. I propose that there was a reanalysis of dative objects as subjects in connection to their fronting to clause-initial position. Concomitantly with this “Argument Swapping”, fronted objects were reanalyzed as subjects, motivated by factors such as the animacy of the dative experiencers (e.g. Haspelmath 2001).

This conclusion is in line with an analysis of “Argument Swapping” with other predicates in Icelandic, including the usual kind of alternating predicates, i.e. those not occurring with adjectival complements (Sigurðardóttir & Eythórsson 2024). The relative chronology of the changes in question can be posited as follows:

- (i) In NOM–DAT structures the dative originally involved objects only.
- (ii) “Argument Swapping” to DAT–NOM structures occurred with some animate dative experiencer NPs.
- (iii) This resulted in a reanalysis of the fronted dative NP as an oblique subject.

Comparative evidence from German and Faroese gives us a window into the possible development of APreds. In both languages, a limited number of dative NPs are preserved in such structures, and they appear to be exclusively objects (e.g. Temme 2014; Jónsson & Pétursdóttir 2012). It seems that APreds with object NPs can be reconstructed for Proto-Germanic, whereas the subject function emerged in Old Icelandic. Gradually, however, the replacement of the argument NPs by PPs has resulted in an increased number of the more productive structures with a nominative subject and a PP, as in (3).

References

- Bernódusson, Helgi. 1982. *Ópersónulegar setningar* [Impersonal sentences]. Cand. mag. thesis, University of Iceland.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2001. Non-canonical marking of core arguments in European languages. *Non-canonical marking of subjects and objects*, eds. Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald, R.M.W. Dixon & Masayuki Onishi, 53–83. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Jónsson, Jóhannes Gísli & Kristín Þóra Pétursdóttir. 2012. Þágufallsandlög með lýsingarorðum í íslensku og færeysku [Dative subjects with adjectives in Icelandic and Faroese]. *Frændafundur 7. Fyrirlestrar frá íslensk-færeyskri ráðstefnu í Reykjavík 21.–22. ágúst 2010*, eds. Magnús Snædal & Turið Sigurðardóttir, 91–108. Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands.
- Nygaard, Marius. 1905. *Norrøn syntax* [Old Norse syntax]. Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Pétursdóttir, Kristín Thóra. 2014. „*Tungan er málinu von*“. *Um lýsingarorð sem stýra þágufalli* [On adjectives governing dative case]. MA thesis, University of Iceland.
- Sigurðardóttir, Sigríður Sæunn & Thórhallur Eythórsson. 2024. The emergence of oblique subjects: Identifiable processes in Icelandic. *Historical Linguistics 2022: Selected papers from the 25th ICHL, Oxford, 1–5 August 2022*, eds. Holly Kennard et al. Amsterdam: Benjamins. To appear.
- Temme, Astrid. 2014. German psych-adjectives. *Zwischen Kern und Peripherie: Untersuchungen zu Randbereichen in Sprache und Grammatik*, eds. Antonio Machicao y Priemer, Andreas Nolda & Athina Sioupi, 131–156. Göttingen: Akademie Verlag/De Gruyter.