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Kossuth, Karen C

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# Icelandic Word Order: In Support of Drift as a Diachronic Principle Specific to Language Families

Karen C. Kossuth, Pomona College

Earliest Icelandic (Iceland was settled by Norwegians beginning in 874 AD) had already made the transition away from the SOV word order posited for Proto-Germanic by Hopper and Lehmann. It probably used an SV-VS word order similar to that which I found in four Sagas from about 1300, in a count using the following categories (Kossuth 1978):

VS includes all clauses beginning with the finite verb, including those in which the subject is in a later than second position, and about five percent yes/no questions and commands.

CVS. The conjunction in CVS clauses is most often ok 'and', but enda 'moreover', þó 'though' and eða 'or' also appear.

SV is subject, then finite verb.

CSV. The most common clause type. The relative particles sem and er were counted as C, but if appropriate, also as S.

TVX. At the beginning of sections, the T is a time or place adverb. Within sections it is more often a participle or verbal particle. The subject may follow the verb directly, or occur after some or all of the VP.

CTVX is TVX with a conjunction.

OTHER includes clauses with more than one argument preceding the verb, impersonals which do not fit the above patterns, and a few scrambled orders.

| Saga (number of clauses) | Njáls Saga (1891) | Laxdœla Saga (1948) | Magnússaga ins Góða (889) | Gísla Saga (2744) | Totals Average% (7472) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| VS | 263<br>14% | 224<br>12% | 120<br>14% | 138<br>5% | 745<br>11% |
| CVS | 129<br>7% | 100<br>5% | 43<br>5% | 360<br>13% | 632<br>7.5% |
| SV | 386<br>20% | 475<br>25% | 155<br>17% | 540<br>20% | 1556<br>20.5% |
| CSV | 517<br>27% | 536<br>28% | 269<br>30% | 807<br>30% | 2129<br>29% |
| TVX | 262<br>14% | 298<br>15% | 204<br>23% | 520<br>18% | 1284<br>17.5% |
| CTVX | 102<br>6% | 157<br>8% | 62<br>7% | 235<br>9% | 556<br>7.5% |
| OTHER | 232<br>12% | 158<br>8% | 36<br>4% | 144<br>5% | 570<br>7% |

As can be seen from the distribution in the four sagas, each basic word order type appears with and without conjunctions, that is, VS and CVS, SV and CSV, TVX and CTVX. The OTHER category appears to be a function of the interaction of marked topicalization, movement of "heavy" items to the end, of the confusion resulting from the ambiguous syntax of relative particles. Only the clauses with relative particles show any trace of SOV word order. If one sets this category aside, there is very little variation in the basic position of the verb, which is in second position almost three quarters of the time, but in first position under twenty percent of the time. Even as late as the period I counted, the choice of basic word orders--VS, SV, TVX--was not entirely free, since they still had a discourse function, though it was already being undermined by word order innovations. VS order marked discourse continuity and anaphoric subjects as well as questions and commands. These two functions tended to be in complementary distribution, as discourse continuity is a feature of narrative, whereas questions and commands occur in dialogue. SV was the unmarked order, and it appeared more often in the sagas I counted after a conjunction than alone. When SV appeared independently, it was generally at the reintroduction of an established topic. TVX orders marked topic shifts and beginnings of sections or paragraphs. I base my analysis of these discourse functions of word order on their correlation with anaphora in Old Icelandic, particularly on the range of possible NP marking: from definite NP to unmarked NP, to pronoun, to deletion. The type of subject marking correlates with the type of word order, as I discussed in Kossuth (1979), so will only summarize here. The most anaphoric word order is VS. The subject in a VS clause of this period is rarely new information. Further, if the subject is not the discourse topic, it is frequently deleted, in what is essentially a gapped clause, but without a conjunction. Such clauses differ from gapping also in that the antecedent of the subject may be any sentence part, except possessive genitive. True gapping is itself quite common in Old Icelandic, so that if one includes gapping in the percentages given for the counts above, it ranges from just under ten percent in Njáls Saga and Laxdœla Saga to twenty percent in Gísla Saga, It is obviously fair to consider a clause which shares its subject with the preceding clause as representing a discourse continuity. So, if one adds gapped clauses to the category of VS and CVS orders, one gets a substantial percentage of discourse continuous clauses. For the sagas I counted: Njáls Saga 19.5%, Laxdœla Saga 24.6%, Magnússaga 27%, and Gísla Saga, which has so many gapped clauses, 34.5%. Of these three types of discourse continuous clauses, two frequently began with ok 'and' followed by the verb. It is likely that by Old Icelandic times, the coincidence of ok with discourse continuity was great enough to undermine the distinctive function of VS word order, particularly since ok co-occurred completely with verb first word order in most full clause uses, and partially (ok + V + X) in gapped clauses. As time passed, the Icelanders extended the function of ok from one of coordination as in the gapped clauses to one of

discourse function, as in the CVS clauses, so that the marking of discourse continuity was transferred from the word order accompanying the conjunction to the conjunction itself. When this happened, the verb first word order became a free variant to subject first word order, and in the process lost its function and its viability. Speakers of Modern Icelandic do not define any particular situation where VS is the only proper order.

In this discussion of VS order, therefore, I am assuming the opposite sequence for the development of VS order than that proposed by Nygaard (1905,347). He maintains that VS order resulted from the original requirement of ok for that particular order, and that VS order represents in fact a CVS clause with a deleted conjunction. My research implies that VS order originally stood alone to mark discourse continuity. By Saga times, the conjunctions ok, which was used for gapped clauses, and enda, which marked afterthoughts, were extended to coordinate sentences, marking discourse continuity redundantly. Eventually, ok usurped from VS order the function of marking discourse continuity, and began again to allow SV order, where earlier only VS order was used. Deprived of its previously distinct function, the role of VS became opaque, and is being lost from the language. In a count of Modern Icelandic I found VS orders less than one percent, and CVS one and a half percent, but gapping holding at about ten percent. Why the Modern Icelandic VS orders I found were chosen, when they did occur, is mostly not clear; the Old Icelandic explanation that they are discourse markers simply doesn't hold for Modern Icelandic. They are too infrequent, and the contexts where they do appear do not seem to be in greater need of "ongoing" marking than areas where they are lacking. Occasionally however a pattern does present itself: In Sjálfstætt Fólk, Halldor Laxness uses the VS order a great deal in his first chapter, five pages long, where of 122 sentences, 36 are verb first. In the second chapter however, seven pages long, there is only one verb first clause, and that one after og 'and'. The same tendency to verb second order holds for the remainder of the novel, and one might conclude that VS order is for Laxness acceptable Icelandic, but a stylistic device with particular impact. Indeed, the first chapter deals with events in the mythically distant past, and it is apparent that Laxness is using the archaic word order intentionally to create a consciously archaic style. That he does not intend the "ongoing narrative" effect of this word order is shown by the fact that he even begins a paragraph with VS order, something which at least the editors of Old Icelandic saga manuscripts have declared unacceptable for Old Icelandic.

In newspaper style, verb first word order is much more frequent. It is commonly used in formulas such as "said he", a context where it has persisted in English also. Beyond that, I could discern no pattern in its use, and assume that it is truly a free variant.

The other side of the coin is the tendency in Modern Icelandic to interject something into first position even when it seems unnecessary except to support the verb second rule. This struck me especially in wire service articles, though also in Jökull Jakobs-

son's popular novel Feilnota í fimmtu sinfóniunni, where I found a pair of sentences, one of which begins with og plus VS, the other with a dummy það 'it' and parallel syntax:

page 9: Og leit enginn við þessu áður í búðunum.
and looked nobody at this before in the stores.
'And nobody paid any attention to this before in the stores.'

það leit enginn við þessu drasli áður.
it looked nobody at this trash before.
'Nobody paid any attention to this trash before.'

The first sentence has a syntax acceptable in Old Icelandic, but the second does not, and only Old Icelandic permitted the VS alternative to this order.

For Modern Icelandic I counted sentence types in two novels and a newspaper: Jökull Jakobsson, Feilnota í fimmtu sinfóniunni; Halldor Laxness, Sjálfstætt Fólk; and Reykjavík's premier newspaper Morgunblaðið from the 24th of October 1976, and the 19th of September that year. I kept wire service articles, which had been translated into Icelandic from AP, UPI and Reuters, separate from local news, which can be assumed to have been written originally in Icelandic and to reflect normal Icelandic newspaper prose. The categories I used are roughly the same as those for Old Icelandic above. Elliptical sentences, those I marked -V here, are very unusual in Old Icelandic, but relatively common now, particularly in popular prose. VS orders, much less common in Modern Icelandic, are split into three categories because the percentage of questions and commands is statistically significant in Modern Icelandic. The remaining category labels are the same, but one, the CTVX does not represent the same sort of sentence: Whereas in Old Icelandic the T was restricted to time adverbs, verbal particles or participles, in Modern Icelandic the T is any kind of adverb, prepositional phrase, or even object of the verb, all of which are uncommon in Old Icelandic as the T in a TVX order. Here is the count, excluding gapped clauses:

| | Wire Service (261) | Local News (257) | Jökull Jakobsson (404) | Halldor Laxness (289) | Totals Average % (1211) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| -V | 1 | 1 | 40<br>10% | 7<br>2% | 49<br>3% |
| VS (Q) | 0 | 0 | 7<br>2% | 4<br>1% | 11<br>1% |
| VS (IMP) | 1 | 1 | 8<br>2% | 6<br>2% | 16<br>1% |
| VS (other) | 5<br>2% | 4<br>2% | 0 | 0 | 9<br>1% |
| CVS | 3<br>1% | 15<br>6% | 2 | 1 | 21<br>2% |

| | Wire Service | Local News | Jökull Jakobsson | Halldor Laxness | Totals Average% |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SV | 88 | 70 | 128 | 95 | 381 |
| | 34% | 27% | 32% | 33% | 32% |
| CSV | 106 | 76 | 108 | 90 | 380 |
| | 41% | 30% | 27% | 31% | 32% |
| TVX | 23 | 46 | 84 | 63 | 216 |
| | 9% | 18% | 21% | 22% | 17.5% |
| CTVX | 18 | 36 | 6 | 11 | 71 |
| | 7% | 14% | 1% | 4% | 6.5% |
| OTHER | 16 | 8 | 21 | 12 | 57 |
| | 6% | 3% | 5% | 4% | 4.5% |

Furthermore, Modern Icelandic is not stopping at a verb second or TVX order similar to Modern German but without the sentence brace; it is moving toward a SV or TSV order such as Modern Scandinavian and Modern English have. I will call this order strict SVO, and for the sake of comparison, consider normal English word order as the paradigm. The outside influence on Icelandic after the "English period" of the fourteenth century was primarily Danish, and one should seek with Danish any language contact there might have been. It is precisely the lack of contact with English which supports the principle of drift when there are parallel developments in Icelandic and English.

So far, in Icelandic the only T which may appear in a TSV sequence is the category of sentence adverb. And only a few adverbs have already made this word order switch, particularly kannski 'perhaps' and svo 'so.' It is possible that this chink in the verb second wall was opened by the borrowing from Danish of the sentence adverb kannski, which requires TSV word order, and that the TSV order with sentence adverbs began to spread from there to other sentence adverbs. Certainly this construction was not grammatical in Old Icelandic:

Jakobsson, p. 6:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Svo | ég | læðist | hingað. |
| 'So | I | creep | over here.' |

Laxness, p. 181:

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kanski | þið | hafið sigrast | á dauðanum | þar | á Útirauðsmýri? |
| 'Perhaps | you | have overcome | death | over there | at Outer Redbog?' |

Though kannski is consistent in its requirement of TSV word order, svo may also occur in a TVX construction as its homonym 'then'. If TSV is extended to svo 'then,' the chink will have broadened, and many adverbs will be acceptable in a TSV sequence.

Of course the TSV word order borrowed with kannski is only possible because of overall developments in the language. One such development, a bellwether of strict SVO, is the tightening of restrictions on subjectless sentences. In a topic-oriented verb second system, a sentence lacking a nominative is no anomaly as long

as something fills the first slot. Thus an object or some adverbial could occupy the first position with impersonal or subjectless sentence types. This is the situation in Modern German, where it seems stable for the time being. It was also the system in Modern Icelandic, apparently until relatively recently, but now Icelandic is moving toward strict SVO. The Old Icelandic pattern for subjectless sentences was:

a. Anaphoric subject deletion was allowed in Old Icelandic,
   i. if the subject was coreferential to the subject of the preceding clause.
   ii. if the subject was coreferential to the last preceding noun, whatever its sentence part.
   iii. if the subject was known or obvious.
b. Indefinite subjects were deleted.
c. Passivization produced a subjectless sentence when the corresponding active sentence had no accusative object.
d. Extraposition could produce a subjectless sentence, or could leave behind a slot-filling þat 'it'.
e. Lexical impersonals were common, including both weather verbs and subjective state verbs.

Let us assume with Lehmann (1974,30ff) and Hopper (1975,88) that the Germanic daughter languages are moving along a continuum from SOV to SVO. In each Germanic language, similar processes are at work in subjectless sentences. The subject deletion rules become less flexible, so that subjects are the only acceptable antecedents; pronouns are innovated to provide a subject where the missing one had been anaphoric, indefinite or extraposed; and with lexical impersonals, a non-nominative assumes subject position. These changes happened in Middle English, and they are happening now in Modern Icelandic:

aa. Anaphoric subject deletion is only allowed:
   i. if the coreferent of the deleted subject is the preceding subject.
   ii. if the subject-verb agreement marked on the verb refers unambiguously to a "known" subject.
bb. Indefinite subject deletion is allowed only when the subject is unspecific. Otherwise indefinite pronouns are used. Modern Icelandic has innovated the pronoun maður 'one.'
cc. Subjectless passives are still common.
dd. For extraposed sentences, the dummy subject það 'it' is still common.
ee. Some lexically impersonal verbs have fallen into disuse, but most are still common and still impersonal, and the [+Human] dative is very common in first position.

With such tolerance of various subject positions, Old Icelandic had no difficulty with as many kinds of missing subjects as it had. And if a certain percentage of sentences were verb-first with all the nominal arguments following the verb, it should be true that even the extreme example, those argumentless impersonals, the weather verbs, for which the verb first word order is the only possibility unless a time or locative phrase intervenes, could be an acceptable

normal sentence type. Modern Icelandic has proportionately less tolerance, and proportionately fewer subjectless sentences. The weather verbs have innovated, but don't always use, dummy pronoun subjects það 'it' and hann 'he.' But the lexical impersonals which refer to subjective states have survived, in spite of the changing syntax, by regularly fronting the human object NP. The result is a symptom of the transition to strict SVO, just as English underwent in the very late Middle Ages. Icelandic is developing a subject hierarchy: The S position belongs to an Agent NP if there is one. If not, to an Experiencer NP. If neither is present, then any nominative assumes first position. The case marking accompanying this first position noun is nominative for Agents and the "other" NPs, but accusative and increasingly dative for the Experiencer NPs. Eventually, as this SVO order becomes more established, as it is in English, a non-nominative in subject position will either be reinterpreted as a nominative, or if it retains its original case, as it frequently does in German, then a dummy subject pronoun will be used to fill the subject slot. English has undergone all these adjustments to SVO, whereas German has made all but one: the lexical impersonals from Middle High German still in use in Modern German do not use a dummy subject, but keep the OV word order they have had throughout history. However, new lexical impersonals coming into German require a dummy es 'it' even when the the sentence starts with a dative or accusative (Lockwood, 1968, 172). There is as yet no indication that Icelandic is beginning to use a dummy pronoun with subjective state impersonals. But it is following English and German in leveling its case markings with these verbs in favor of the dative, where before there had been a possibly ambiguous accusative. Of the two surface cases possible with these verbs, the dative is the less common historically, but it is taking over from the accusative the marking of many impersonals. School grammarians in Iceland rail futilely at the growing "Dative Sickness" (þágufallssyki), but it seems to be well entrenched. So, for example, in a review in the educational periodical Menntamál of a book entitled Móðurmál 'Mothertongue' by Ársæll Sigurðsson: "Here are also to be found exercises to root out those stubborn dative mistakes." One commonly hears the dative, as in:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Mér vantar.... | Mér langar.... | Mér dreymdi.... |
| 'Me lacks...' | 'Me longs....' | 'Me dreamed....' |

All of these verbs traditionally govern an accusative. The effect of this change is a somewhat more unified reflection of the underlying semantic function: the new datives appear with impersonal verbs and an accusative or prepositional object, leaving the realm of personal sentences more than ever to the dominant Agent/nominative pattern. There are even examples of nominative Experiencers shifting to the dative case, offering an even stronger support to the idea of an Agent/Experiencer hierarchy for subjects.

The obligatory fronting of the objects of subjective state verbs points to a reanalysis underway of the objects of these verbs as grammatical subjects rather than merely as a fronted T. In a

grammar published in Akureyri, Skuli Benediktsson says: "The position and meaning of the noun complements with impersonal verbs is often similar to the position and meaning of the subject with impersonal verbs." (Benediktsson, 1970, 58) As such, these subjects fulfill many of Keenan's subject criteria (Keenan, 1976, 303); at least, of the criteria which can be used to identify Germanic subjects in general, the Experiencer subject of impersonal verbs fulfills all those not directly related to the nominative case or to the Agent function. The most interesting of these are in Keenan's section on autonomous reference. First, the Experiencers control coreferential subject deletion:

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hann | langaði | í kaffi, | og | fór | svo heim. |
| acc | V 3sg | | | V 3sg | |
| He | desired | for coffee | and | went | therefore home. |

'He wished for coffee, and so went home.'

And the other way around:

Halldor Laxness, p.48:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hann | sofnaði | og | dreymdi | kú. |
| nom | V 3sg | | V 3sg | acc |
| He | fell asleep, | and | dreamed | cow |

'He fell asleep, and dreamed of a cow.'

In this example the deleted pronoun is the accusative object of the impersonal subjective state verb dreyma 'to dream'. Note the nominative/accusative ambiguity in the pronoun hann; the first and second person pronouns, which are much more common with subjective state verbs, do not have this dative/accusative homonymity.

Second, the Experiencer subjects also control reflexivization:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hann | dreymdi | sjálfan | sig. |
| acc | V 3sg | ADJ,acc | acc |
| He | dreamed | self | himself |

'He dreamed of himself.'

Halldor Laxness, p. 25.

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| þeim | fanst | óbrúandi | haf | milli | hennar | og | sín. |
| dat | V 3sg | ADJ nom | N nom | PREP | gen | | gen |
| Them | seemed | unbridgeable | sea | between | her | and | themselves. |

'It seemed to them that there was an unbridgeable sea between her and themselves.'

Not only do non-nominatives control reflexivization, but the adjectival reflexive may even appear in the nominative:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hverjum | þykir | sinn | fugl | fagur |
| dat | V 3sg | ADJ.REFL.nom | N.nom | PRED ADJ |
| Each | thinks | his own | bird | beautiful. |

This is a turn-around of reflexivization as traditionally conceived, since reflexivization is normally a predicate process. The syntax only makes sense if the dative can be considered the "subject". Furthermore, the position of the reflexive relative to the antecedent is not an issue here, for backward reflexivization is also

grammatical.

Halldor Laxness, p. 14:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gagnvart | undirgefni | hunds | síns | hlær |
| PREP | N dat | N gen | ADJ.REFL.gen | V 3sg |
| In the presence of subservience | | dog | his | laughs |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| honum | hugur | í brjósti | sökum | máttar | síns |
| dat | N nom | PREP PHR | PREP | N gen | ADJ.REFL.gen |
| him | spirit | in breast | because of | might | his |

'In comparison to the subservience of his dog, his spirit laughs because of his own might.'

Here there are two reflexives, one preceding and one following the antecedent, which is a possessive dative (not, in this case, the Experiencer with a subjective state verb). There is a nominative subject, hugur, and it follows the dative. Though sentences with non-nominative antecedents for reflexives are common in Modern Icelandic, they are ungrammatical in English, and rare in German. I am endebted to Theo Vennemann for this German example:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ihm | graute | vor | sich. |
| dat | V 3sg | PREP | dat |
| Him | felt horror | of | himself |

In each of the above examples a reflexive has had a non-nominative human antecedent, even when a nominative non-human noun was present. Clearly Icelandic has reinterpreted the grammatical definition of subject to allow for a subject which might not be nominative. This development is parallel to the stage in Middle English where subject position was allowed to be dative or accusative. That stage was followed by a period in which the Middle English Experiencers governed verb agreement, even while they themselves were not nominative. Icelandic verb agreement has not taken this step yet, though its reflexivization and deletion functions are at this point.

Assuming that the daughter languages of Proto-Germanic started out with a unified syntax, it is not surprising that they should develop along a similar course. What is surprising is that the pace of their change should vary so much, but the substance so little. Old English permits the verb in all three basic positions: initial, second and final. But in Old English, variant word orders are attributed to clause type, which is probably parallel to the differences I cite for Old Icelandic in the marking of discourse continuity, and it is likely that Icelandic word order was roughly in step with English until the end of the Middle English period. At that point--a turbulent one for English syntax in general--English moved on to strict SVO, making changes that Icelandic is beginning to make now. Certainly the five hundred year interval makes it difficult to attribute this Icelandic change to simple borrowing. And none of the foreign languages commonly learned by Modern Icelanders is at the transition to SVO.

We have an important advantage in looking at Icelandic. It is the most conservative of the Germanic languages, and might be expec-

ted to develop along the same lines as its sisters and cousins on the Continent. At least in the area of word order, this seems to be the case. The genetic basis is clear, as is a linguistic history relatively free of linguistic interference, though it would be unrealistic to ignore the impact of centuries of Danish rule. Because of Old Icelandic's syntactic similarity to its contemporary Middle English, followed until the twentieth century by relatively stable syntax, then by changes parallel to those made in Early Modern English, I consider the Icelandic data to be in strong support of a principle of drift, language family specific, as Sapir proposed it. However, it is possible that this principle can be extended to the status of a diachronic universal, specifying, as Vennemann does, that languages with "pragmatic syntax," typified by the discourse oriented word order variants of earlier Germanic, will move on to the "semantic syntax" of topic oriented verb second word order, and then to subject oriented strict SVO. If Noriko McCawley's data are typical (personal communication), it may further be possible to specify the syntactic conditions under which impersonal objects begin to assume the functions of subject. I might tentatively propose that SV-VS languages with impersonal subjective state verbs are ripe for word order change triggered by, or at least accompanied by, the subjectivalization of the objects of those subjective state verbs. Certainly the connection between the strict SVO and these impersonals is a likely subject for more research, since so many languages with attested history have made the shift to strict SVO.

In concentrating my analysis of Icelandic on VS word order and subjectless sentences, I have shown how Icelandic has moved from discourse oriented, post SOV word order in Proto-Norse, through topic oriented verb second order in Old Icelandic, on to the brink of strict SVO word order in Modern Icelandic. It is my contention that this word order development is common Germanic, and the result of a built-in tendency for a language to change along a course specific at least to its own language family.

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